

Generally, classes are getting larger, there is pressure for academics to teach more, funds available for research are declining, and salaries are not keeping abreast of inflation. There are signs that the morale of the academic profession is beginning to be sapped. Academic administrators, who must say “no” more often, are obvious and easy targets for those who feel exploited and unappreciated.

The decline of institutional commitment is of great significance as universities struggle to change in order to meet new demands and shoulder the burdens imposed by fiscal problems and government-imposed legislation. Traditionally, colleges and universities have depended on the faculty to implement policy, and for decades the faculty has **also** played a central role in formulating policies as well. The hallowed concept of institutional autonomy, perhaps honored in most countries more in ideology than in reality, has come under increasing attack as governments have moved to reduce expenditure on higher education and to centralize decision making. Many faculty believe that the calls for accountability are politically motivated, and that they are simply being scapegoated. Large numbers are feeling that the harder they try, the less they are appreciated.

Universities worldwide face a dilemma. There is a near universal trend toward more emphasis on teaching, demands that faculty members account for their activities, with assessment as a means of measuring the effectiveness of academic effort, and a growing societal unease with traditional ideas of university autonomy. These trends have gone furthest, perhaps, in England, where our survey makes it more transparent that faculty morale has plummeted, and alienation is widespread.

But there is extensive evidence of this pressure everywhere. If ever there was a “golden age” for the professoriate, it has obviously passed. Academic institutions are increasingly seen by policymakers and opinion leaders as large enterprises that should be managed by the same criteria applied to other sectors of the economy. Our analysis shows that the core of the university, the faculty, do not feel comfortable with this view. As a result, they are increasingly alienated from their institutions. The majority of faculty in every country surveyed, except the Netherlands, felt that the sense of community was declining on campus.

Happily, faculty members still have a commitment to their profession and to the role of teacher and researcher. On the other hand, they have serious skepticism about current trends in higher education; an alarming number feel victimized. If the academic profession remains alienated from institutional leadership and from current changes in higher education worldwide, it is unlikely that higher education will move into the 21st century on a positive note.

## The Ratchet and the Lattice

### Understanding the Complexity of the Modern University

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**Editor's Note:** This article was adapted by Peter Nichols from the June 1990 issue of *Policy Perspectives*. While the article focuses on the United States, it has relevance internationally, and for this reason we are indebted to Peter Nichols for his assistance. The concept was developed by Professor William F. Massy, director of the Stanford Research Institute on Higher Education, Stanford University.

Increasingly, colleges and universities are being asked to change the way they conduct their business: how decisions are made, how functions are staffed, how buildings are built and with what amenities, and finally, how the energies of the institution are distributed between collective goals and individual pursuits. How can colleges and universities redesign the way they conduct their business without sacrificing their ability to invest in new ideas? A first step in answering this question is to gain a more particular understanding of how and why institutional costs have increased over the last decade. Two images that provide an insight into these changes are what the Pew Higher Education Roundtable has termed the “administrative lattice” and the “academic ratchet.” It is the combined actions of the lattice and the ratchet that increase institutional costs. The insights for these ideas come from the American higher education system, but there is considerable international relevance.

#### The *Lattice*

The administrative lattice describes the proliferation and entrenchment of administrative staff at American colleges and universities over the past two decades. The term connotes not just the fact of this increase in staff—estimated at 60 percent nationwide between 1975 and 1985—but its effects on an institution's operations and costs. These include the transfer of **tasks** formerly accorded to faculty; the growth of “consensus management,” which effectively diffuses risk and responsibility for decisions; and the increase of costs and decline of efficiency as administrative bureaucracy extends and solidifies its ties within an institution. The impulse at almost every **turn** has been to develop the lattice

further, rewarding administrative personnel who show initiative with larger staffs and increased responsibility.

#### The Ratchet

The academic ratchet refers to the steady, irreversible shift of faculty allegiance away from the goals of a given institution, toward those of an academic specialty. The ratchet denotes the advance of an independent, entrepreneurial spirit among faculty nationwide. Institutions seeking to enhance their own prestige may contribute to the ratchet effect by reducing faculty teaching and advising responsibilities across the board, thus enabling faculty to pursue their individual research and publication with fewer distractions. The academic ratchet raises an institution's costs, and it results in undergraduates paying more to attend institutions in which they receive less faculty attention than in previous decades.

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While faculty members have complained about the rate of administrative growth, some of the principal beneficiaries of administrative entrepreneurialism have ironically been the faculty themselves. The four and one-half decades since the close of the Second World War have witnessed a fundamental transformation of the American professoriate. In 1940 there were approximately 147,000 full-time faculty in just over 1,700 colleges and universities. By the mid-1980s, the number of institutions had nearly doubled, while the number of faculty members more than quadrupled. Over the decades, a shift has occurred in the focus of faculty's efforts. Because reliable quantitative data are maddeningly absent, our best guess is that professors in 1990 spend less time in the classroom than their counterparts before the Second World War. There is a general feeling that faculty today spend less time advising, teach fewer courses outside their specialties, and are less committed to a commonly defined curriculum.

These shifts are the visible evidence of a pervasive change in the definition of the academic task—what it is that faculty are formally paid to do and for whom. Through the past four decades the academic ratchet has loosened the faculty members' connection to their institution. Each

turn of the ratchet has drawn the norm of faculty activity away from institutionally defined goals and toward the more specialized concerns of faculty research, publication, professional service, and personal pursuits.

Part of what makes the ratchet work is the uniformity with which faculty members expect to be treated with respect to work loads. It is almost impossible, for example, for there to be substantial differentiation of teaching loads within a single department. As long as a few faculty members are advantaged, there will be an irresistible pressure to lower the average load—advancing the ratchet by another click. No one wants to teach more general courses at the expense of the opportunity to teach one's specialty. Eventually everyone gets to teach his or her specialty. The number of general courses declines, the number of specialized offerings increases—and the ratchet turns again.

It is a process that has produced gains as well as losses—increased research productivity, a more expansive set of courses, more freedom for students, particularly those prepared to join their faculty mentors in specialized study. Such gains have been achieved, however, at substantial costs: the need for academic support personnel to leverage faculty time, administrative staff to perform tasks once routinely assigned to the faculty, and a need to increase the size of the faculty. The larger cost, however, lies in the shift of faculty attention and effort away from institutionally defined goals and toward personally and professionally defined pursuits.

Before the Second World War, faculty were largely extensions of their institutions, identified with and part of a collectivity that linked them together in common endeavor. The curriculum was collectively developed. Students were guided through a series of courses in which there was a clear introduction, a variety of middle-level experiences, and a final set of advanced courses that constituted the major. Faculty members devoted as much, if not more, time to teaching general courses within the department as to teaching their own specialties. Teaching loads were heavier than now, but seldom onerous, leaving sufficient time for advising and mentoring, as well as the more limited amount of publication expected of most faculty.

A sad paradox has come to describe the changing responsibilities and perceptions of the American professoriate. Many of those who chose an academic career did so as a result of having been taught well as an undergraduate, often at a smaller, teaching-oriented institution. After years of graduate training and experience in the academic profession, however, college faculty learn to seek "relief" from the responsibilities of teaching, mentoring, and developing their college's and department's curriculum; they soon

realize that the real gainers are those faculty members who earn more discretionary time to pursue their own definitions of purposeful work. They understand that professional status depends as much, if not more, on one's standing within a discipline—and less on one's role as a master instructor within an increasingly complex institution.

Because of the growth of the administrative lattice, faculty no longer numerically dominate their institutions, are generally more concerned about their standing within their disciplines, and are more ready to move in search of better deals. The irony is that while administrative units have become more like academic departments—more committed to group processes and collective decision making—more and more faculty have become independent contractors largely unfettered by the constraints of institutional needs and community practices.

#### *A Framework for Redesign*

Change will not come easily, or even purposefully, as long as higher education as an industry perceives itself to require neither greater efficiency nor a heightened sense of accountability. Absent a commitment to redesign, colleges and universities will likely presume that the process of incremental growth can be reversed, leading to decremental and largely across-the-board budget reductions. The resulting budget compression would neither dismantle the administrative lattice nor reverse the academic ratchet, largely because budget compression places a management premium on achieving reductions that affect as few people as possible. If, on the other hand, a college or university were prepared to proceed by design rather than by compression, what steps might it take to reverse the academic ratchet?

*Shift the focus of incentives away from individual faculty members and toward their departments, divisions, and schools.* Reversing the academic ratchet will prove difficult, in part because the looming shortage of research-trained scholars will substantially enhance the faculty's bargaining position. A first step available to most institutions is to focus less on individual faculty members and more on departments, divisions, and schools. Begin distributing resources less in terms of rewarding individual faculty members and more in terms of strengthening departments.

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#### **Steps to take in reversing the academic ratchet:**

**1) Shift the focus of incentives away from individual faculty members and toward their departments, divisions, and schools.**

**2) Make clear who is in charge.**

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Make the department rather than the individual instructor responsible for the quality of undergraduate instruction and the nature of the curriculum. Focus less on the teaching loads of individual faculty members and more on the aggregate amount of instruction expected from a department, and then leave to the department's members the distribution of individual assignments. If the department understood that it would be rewarded collectively—in terms of salary increases, tenure levels, new appointments, and support funds—for the quality of its instructional programs, it might allocate its own resources with an eye to achieving better outcomes. Such a shift in attitude would halt, and perhaps even begin reversing, the progress of the ratchet.

*Make clear who is in charge.* It has become fashionable to mourn the loss of educational leadership—to wish for bygone days when a Charles Eliot and Nicholas Murray Butler could single-handedly recast Harvard and Columbia, and in the process change the nature of higher education. We recommend a more prosaic change. What institutions of higher education need now are effective decision makers—what in the old days were called men and women with vision and backbone—who feel empowered, often by their boards of trustees, to make choices for which they will be held accountable. Academic leaders and key administrative managers need to know that they can make a difference, that they will be demonstrably rewarded for their successes, and properly chastised, perhaps even retired, for their failures. Less time needs to be spent consulting, and to getting everyone to “own” the outcome. At the level of the academic department, such empowering means strengthening the hands of the department chairs. At the level of school deans and principal managers, taking accountability and responsibility implies a willingness to change personnel more easily and with less political consequence.