

An administrative blight is destined to spread throughout universities if academics don't learn how to resist

by Blog Admin

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*The structure of universities in the UK, US and Canada have altered dramatically in recent years with numbers of administrative and support personnel rising rapidly by up to 300 per cent in some institutions. **Benjamin Ginsberg** warns that academic priorities are determined by administrators without goals of scholarship at heart.*



During my nearly five decades in the academic world, the character of the university has changed, and not entirely for the better. As recently as the 1960s and 1970s, British, American and Canadian universities were heavily influenced, if not completely driven by faculty ideas and concerns. Today, institutions of higher education are mainly controlled by administrators and staffers who make the rules and set more and more of the priorities of academic life.

The ongoing transfer of power from professors to administrators has important implications for the curricula and research agendas of America's colleges and universities. On the surface, faculty members and administrators seem to share a general understanding of the university and its place in society. If asked to characterize the "mission" of the university, members of both groups will usually agree with the broad idea that the university is an institution that produces and disseminates knowledge through its teaching, research, public outreach and other programs.

This surface similarity of professorial and administrative perspectives, however, is deceptive. To members of the faculty, scholarship and teaching are the main purposes of academic life and the university is an institutional means or instrument through which to achieve those ends.

For administrators, on the other hand, the faculty's research and teaching activities are means of attracting students and generating revenues and not ends in and of themselves.

These differing orientations, in turn, give administrators and professors different views of schools' teaching and research activities. In matters of pedagogy, administrators have what might be called a "demand-side" view of the curriculum. Administrators believe that a college curriculum should be heavily influenced, if not completely governed, by the usually vocational interests and preferences of potential customers – the students, parents and others who directly or indirectly pay the bills.

Viewing teaching as an end more than a means, on the other hand, usually leads the faculty to take what might be called a supply-side view of the curriculum. That is, professors are more concerned with teaching what they, themselves, deem to be important than simply complying with the preferences of students and other campus constituencies. This perspective is sometimes criticized as indicative of the faculty's self indulgence. Yet, professors quite reasonably believe that they are better qualified than students to decide what the latter should learn. Most students come to college with immature and uninformed preferences, or unconsciously echoing some parental agenda, and require considerable experience, exposure to a variety of disciplines in a liberal education, and a good deal of faculty guidance before they are sufficiently aware of the intellectual and even economic possibilities open to them.

In the realm of research, faculty tend to take the view that ideas and discoveries should be broadly disseminated through peer-reviewed publications and presentations at professional meetings. Some professors, to be sure, are interested in the possibility of profiting from their discoveries. Most professors, though are more concerned with the process of discovery and the professional recognition that comes from developing new ideas in the laboratory, in the library or at a computer terminal and see any pecuniary gain to themselves as incidental to their main goals. University administrators, on the other hand, view faculty research as a potential source of revenue for the institution and are not particularly entranced by its intellectual merits except when commissioning puff pieces for the media. In recent years in the U.S., through the growth of technology transfer offices and the like, administrators have taken charge

of the dissemination of knowledge. To administrators, scientific discoveries are not important for their own sake. Rather, they are sources of millions of dollars, even hundreds of millions of dollars in potential overhead and licensing fees. Efforts by technology transfer offices to guard this bonanza generally slow and encumber the dissemination of ideas.

What is the ultimate purpose of these administrative efforts? Administrators say their goal is to strengthen their institutions in order to better equip them to pursue their teaching and research missions. If, however, we focus on what administrators do, rather than what they say, a different picture emerges. What administrators do with tuition and research revenues is to reward themselves and expand their own ranks. At most schools, even mid-level administrators are now paid more than all but the most senior professors in the professional schools. And, administrative growth has been rampant everywhere. A recent study showed that between 1997 and 2007, the number of administrative and support personnel per 100 students had increased dramatically at most schools – 103 per cent at Williams College; 111 per cent at Johns Hopkins; 325 per cent at Wake Forest University; and 351 per cent at Yeshiva University, to cite some noteworthy examples. Though it showed an increase of only 97 per cent between 1997 and 2007, Vanderbilt has the dubious distinction of ranking first in the nation in the absolute employee to student ratio. On Vanderbilt's Nashville campus 11,395 students enjoy the services of 7,339 deans, deanlets and staffers. By contrast, the 11,345 students attending Yale surely receive an inferior education under the guidance of only 3,919 administrators. Harvard, Chicago and Princeton students were even more deprived of the chance to interact with deanlets and should demand tuition refunds.

Where is all this leading? It is leading, and at many schools has already led to, the creation of the all-administrative university where classes are taught by contingent faculty paid on a per course basis while curricular and academic priorities are determined by administrators who lack serious academic backgrounds and whose focus is in business rather than scholarship.

This administrative blight has already affected hundreds of schools and seems destined to spread unless the faculty quickly learns how to resist.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics

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