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AUTHOR Miles, Jack
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ABSTRACT

Raising productivity (producing more graduates per professor at acceptable quality level) is presented as one approach to dealing with American universities' fiscal crisis. Faculty can increase classroom productivity in a way that protects and even strengthens genuine research. This approach uses the publishing industry model in funding university research and writing projects, in which an aspiring author's prospectus results in an advance to permit writing to begin, and earnings are divided by the professor and the publisher. Universities could fund all research prospectively, one project at a time, as publishers do, and require any professor whose research had not been funded to fill up the rest of his/her work schedule with teaching. All faculty would be assigned a nominal 12-course annual complement of teaching. Paid time for research would be "advanced" only for well presented and plausible projects and only to some aggregate upper limit that the university could afford. A periodic decision would be made about how much research the university could afford, and the university would decide who should get a slice and how big it should be. The intent would be to ration professors' time in a way that would most effectively preserve the university as a community devoted to learning as well as to teaching. (JDD)

A MODEST PROPOSAL

. . . for Saving University Research from the Budget Butcher

by Jack Miles

An Occasional Paper Published by

THE CALIFORNIA
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A Modest Proposal is one of a series of occasional papers published by The California Higher Education Policy Center to stimulate discussion of issues important to the future of higher education. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect official positions of the Center. The Center welcomes the responses of readers.

The fiscal crisis of the American university is an open secret. Borrowing can't close the funding gap. Tuition increases can't close it. Above all, taxation can't close it. The invitation to a recent [November 1993] Pew Higher Education Roundtable conference on the restructuring of higher education compares the university of the 1990s to the mental hospital of the 1970s. For better or worse, the state decided in the 1970s "to become a purchaser of [mental health] services rather than a supporter of institutions. It is not inconceivable that colleges and universities could experience a similar change in public perception." Not all colleges and universities are state owned, of course, but almost all are significantly state assisted. If the higher education/mental health analogy holds true, the major public universities will fail, and surviving private colleges and universities will become prohibitively expensive and exclusive in the manner of private mental hospitals.

One major card, however, remains to be played—the productivity card. University professors may define themselves by their respective fields: you are a physicist, I am an historian, she is an economist, etc. University managers level these discipline-bound definitions: all professors are teachers, and the well-instructed graduate is their collective product. Raising productivity, producing more graduates per professor at an acceptable level of quality, could lower cost and save the viability of the institution. The same Pew Higher Education Roundtable invitation sees large changes in prospect:

> Changing the planning parameters means making downsizing an institutional goal to be achieved, not by a sudden and irreversible lay-off of hundreds or thousands of employees—as businesses have too often done—but through a process that takes advantage of normal attrition to both shrink and reorganize staff functions. . . . Given strong leadership and a sustained commitment to the retraining of current staff, *we believe that a five-to-seven-year process designed to re-engineer operations can yield a 25 percent reduction in the number of full-time employees an institution requires.*

Emphasis added, as if any were needed. By most popular reckoning, five-percent annual reductions for five straight years clearly qualify as "a sudden and irreversible lay-off of hundreds or thousands of employees." Benno Schmidt, the former president of Yale University, lost his job after proposing a mere ten percent reduction on no such rapid timetable.

Will any of this happen? Though the new breed of educational management consultant tends to fault the university establishment for placing the survival of the institution ahead of all other values, the appeal of tough productivity talk is ultimately directed to just that institutional survival

instinct. There is, accordingly, every likelihood that university management will take the advice being offered. Tenured faculty acting in concert may win a battle or two, as at Yale, but they cannot win the war. They cannot maintain the *ancien régime* of research and teaching as they have known it. The fiscal crisis has placed too powerful a weapon in the hands of those calling for the overthrow of that regime.

What faculty can do, however, is take action to co-opt the revolution by pre-emptively increasing classroom productivity in a way that protects and even strengthens genuine research. The way to do this is to replace the current model for the funding of university research with another model already familiar to most if not all professors.

The University vs. the Publishing House: Two Models of Funding

Book publishers and universities have in common that they both pay people to do research and write. They structure their payment differently, however. Book publishers consider each writing project in advance and separately. Only if they like an aspiring author's prospectus do they appropriate money—the advance against royalties—to permit the writing to begin. Universities, however, do not consider each professorial writing project separately or in advance. Instead, every professor is automatically given a certain amount of time off from teaching for research and writing. Periodically, the fruits of this research and writing are given a retrospective review, and the professor is rewarded with tenure or promotion or a "merit increase" in salary. It is at such moments that "publish or perish" traditionally applies.

In effect, a professor is paid in three stages for his or her research. First, he or she is paid a salary for the time it takes to write or otherwise to do the work. Second, if and when the work begins to earn money, he or she is paid a royalty or a consultation fee. Third, after the work is safely in print or otherwise complete, payment comes again in the form of the mentioned tenure, promotion or "merit increase."

Significant, perhaps massive, savings could result if universities would fund all research prospectively, one project at a time, as publishers do, and require any professor whose research had not been funded to fill up the rest of his or her work schedule with teaching.

In book publishing, this standard academic procedure—advancing money to a writer without knowing what the writer will write or whether he will write anything at all—would be thought little short of insane. The procedure has something of an analogue, to be sure, in magazine and newspaper publishing, where writers are placed on salary by an employer who does not know in advance just what they will be writing about. However, a magazine or newspaper writer who writes nothing for a year or two will be fired; a tenured college professor who does the same will be retained and, indeed, scarcely noticed.

At the second or royalties stage, what is striking about the payment structure of academic publication is that earnings are divided without remainder by the professor and his or her publisher; that is, the university that funded the work by buying the professor's research time enjoys no direct recovery of that investment. The newspaper or magazine obviously recover its invest-

ment in the salaried journalist, and so does a book publisher publishing a book by a professor. In sharpest contrast, a university may have paid for all or most of the writer's time, and yet only the publishing house will share the writer's earnings. When a university licenses a patent to a corporation, it does share in the value created by professors who made the discovery in the university's laboratories. However, this participation is the exception, not the rule. Most research-and-writing income accrues exclusively to the professor.

At the third or tenure-and-promotion stage, nothing in book or newspaper publishing quite corresponds to the mores of academic life. At the end of the year a newspaper reporter may receive a promotion or "merit increase" because a particular article has been judged outstanding, or because the general quality of the work done is thought high, but the mere fact that articles have appeared in print wins nothing. For that, a salary has already been paid, and there the matter rests. Similarly, in book publishing, unless a book happens to win a cash prize, there is no tangible compensation beyond the contracted-for royalty. In academe, by contrast, though an admired book does count for more than an ignored book, bona fide publication of any kind has traditionally counted for something not just toward tenure but also toward promotion and salary increases.

Significant, perhaps massive, savings could result if universities would fund all research prospectively, one project at a time, as publishers do, and require any professor whose research had not been funded to fill up the rest of his or her work schedule with teaching. Universities would do this by assigning all faculty a nominal twelve-course annual complement (supposing a four-quarter, year-round teaching schedule and three courses per quarter as a full load) and reducing this complement only for specific cause. They would "advance" paid time for research to given professors but only for well-presented and plausible projects and only to some aggregate upper limit that the university could afford. The inherent open-endedness of research would not be compromised any more than it is in the preparation of a grant application, and it would be understood that a professor could quite reasonably apply for time off even for such general purposes as "staying current."

The intent of the funding change would not be to change the character of the work funded, in other words, or to make professors behave differently in their discretionary time. The intent would rather be to ration this time in a way that would most effectively preserve the university as a community devoted to learning as well as to teaching. Adapting the publishing model for campus use would force a university first to aggregate its now rather chaotically disaggregated research budget and then, having seen that budget whole for the first time, to disaggregate it again on a proposal-by-proposal basis. It would end the current practice of automatically giving every professor an annual chunk of the research budget without regard for how he or she intends to spend it.

Individual departments at research universities often have special research accounts; and for a professor with a promising project, an extra quarter or semester of time for research will, even now, often be funded from such an account on the basis of a written proposal. By contrast, research time paid for in the form of salary for a standard mix of research and teaching is not budgeted separately. My proposal is to take what is now a secondary funding method and make it primary. If this were done, a periodic decision could be made about how much research the university could afford. At that point, with the size of the pie known, the university would proceed rationally to decide who should get a slice and how big it should be.

To speak of prospective as opposed to retrospective funding of research as "the publishing model" is to imply that the result of research is the published book. More broadly, of course, this model could apply to research made public in any form. And if a given professor's university-

funded research activity seemed likely to be lucrative in some other way—not just as royalties from an economics textbook, then, but also as fees paid for a management consulting gig or for consulted lab work at the interface between academe and industry—then the terms of the time-... se contract could be negotiated to provide the university a share of the earnings. Many academ... projects, particularly in the humanities, are not at all lucrative. Some serious technological journals actually require the contributor to pay for the privilege of publication. On balance, it seems safe to say, research is going to remain an expense rather than become a major source of income for the university. Still, individualized contracts for faculty research could at least pool losses and gains with a net savings for the university.

When Should Noblesse Oblige?

The dominant academic culture now dictates that unless every full-time faculty member at a university is a researcher, the university shall not be regarded as a true research university. Defining anyone but a graduate student or temporary appointee "down" into the category of pure teacher is taken to reflect extremely ill on the overall profile of the institution. At enormous cost, every drone is fed like a queen bee. At its best, make no mistake, this enriched diet can produce genuine prodigies of learning: "Yes, Donald hasn't published anything in twenty years, but have you ever spoken to him? He's simply brilliant. These things take time. One of these years he will surprise the world." And, sure enough, one of these years Donald may indeed surprise the world, repaying by a hundredfold the confidence his colleagues entertained in him during the long gestation of a deeply original project. At the ninth or tenth year, had they forced him to assume a full teaching load, his great work might never have come to completion.

But allocations of research time need not be made annually. James Boswell worked for twenty years on his *Life of Johnson*. Were he alive today and employed as a college professor, he could conceivably receive a five-year research grant from his university. After the five years, if he had made convincing progress, he could receive another five-year grant. After the ten, there might be resistance to further support. But imagine the experience of reading Boswell's masterpiece at midpoint! Genius is not always unrecognized. There is a good chance that Boswell's work-in-progress would have won over the skeptics. A twenty-year project is, in any event, close to the limit case. What counts, in essence, is that the university's research money should not be spent until a reasonable case has been made that it will not be wasted. At the moment, at most universities, no case of any sort needs to be made before the money starts flowing.

No one who understands the life of the mind can doubt that time and tolerance are its necessary conditions. Europe often seems better aware of these conditions than America. Europeans, to begin with, are somewhat less likely to ask "What do you do?" But if they do and if you answer, "I am writing a book," you will be taken to have given a real and adequate answer. An American questioner is likely, silently or aloud, to follow up, skeptically, "Yes, but what else do you do? I mean, what do you do for a *living*?" Unfortunately, nothing is more inimical to large, serious work than just that kind of Babbittry. And nothing could be more fatal to the greatness of a great university than for the same attitude to be institutionalized. To be blunt, scholars who have mastered a subject are immeasurably more important to a university's long-term health than teachers who love students.

And yet fraternal solidarity and noble forbearance among aristocrats of the mind can have costly and damaging side effects. True abuses (as of graduate students and underpaid part-time instructors) aside, the dominant culture turns a willfully blind eye to real differences within the corps of

tenured professors themselves. A man who once had something to say, and said it, may have nothing more to say. Must he, from that point until his retirement, be paid for his silence? The current academic culture says, "Yes, he must," and maintains the fiction that, someday, research will result. There are professors, of course, who are happy to be thus indulged, but there are others who are honest enough to be embarrassed and who would be happy to teach a little more if, in exchange, they could be spared the foolish imperative "publish or perish." The same aristocratic attitude that will wait for years for the work of a true artist or a true scholar is properly peremptory in its dismissal of the mediocre. It is folly to enshrine the one kind of aristocratic independence of mind and disdain the other.

A Wonder of the World?

Apologists for the American research university have tended to defend it in the manner of Winston Churchill defending democracy as the worst form of government ever invented, except for all the others. David Pierpont Gardner, former president of the University of California, was a past master of this kind of rhetoric. For him, the American university—and, of course, his institution in particular—was the one American enterprise that was still world-class. Tamper with it, the message went, and risk the fate of Detroit. But in truth, defending America's way of funding university teaching and research is less like defending democracy itself than it is like defending two senatorial votes for 800,000 Montanans and two for 32,000,000 Californians. Not every anomaly is a wonder. And as to its productivity, the over-staffed American university, with money going to too many tenured professors who do no research and little teaching, looks disturbingly like Detroit just before the tailspin. Yes, the American marriage of undergraduate teaching to advanced graduate research sometimes works to splendid educational effect, but the union is a more peculiar, more questionable one than we usually admit. Instead of effectively denying the existence of the mediocre researcher who is a perfectly adequate teacher, why not reward the teacher's real gifts and excuse him or her from research?

With such changes in prospect, importing the publisher's-advance model into the academic setting makes possible some degree of pre-emptive engagement by those who know what learning means and requires.

Can the university afford to do otherwise? The higher education cost crisis—addressed hitherto as a revenue crisis (taxes, endowment, tuition, etc.)—is about to be addressed as a management crisis. And, by whatever painful and now unforeseeable stages, management is going to start buying more teaching and less research from the professoriate. As this happens, some senior faculty are going to be working a lot harder than they used to. Others, now working harder than any layman imagines (a research scholar is, in effect, never on holiday), will nonetheless be teaching more than they ever thought they would and much more than they would like.

With such changes in prospect, importing the publisher's-advance model into the academic setting makes possible some degree of pre-emptive engagement by those who know what learning means and requires; some degree of defense, in other words, against ham-handed interventions not just by state legislators but also by college presidents of narrow education—"pure" administrators, if you will—who, when asked to cut deep, will do so with gusto, beginning with what they understand least and rarely considering individual professors individually. A great deal of talk, for example, is being heard of consolidation among related or even merely neighboring col-

leges and universities. Campus A is strong in Spanish, weak in engineering; campus B is weak in Spanish, strong in engineering. Each decides to eliminate its weak department and spend the money saved on its strong one. Smart management? Not if the weak department in each school contained one brilliant professor, towering above his weak colleagues, or if the strong departments contained several weak professors, carried by their more accomplished colleagues. Knowledge of strength and weakness at this level is much more likely to be found in the faculty than in the administration, and so is the will to seek solutions one professor at a time.

Adapting the publishing model to the university will not be administratively or emotionally easy. If academic politics are nasty now, imagine how nasty they will become when the winners get to decide how much the losers will teach, whose book is worth writing and whose isn't, and who needs to split his textbook royalties or lecture fees with the college. And no school can make major changes in isolation. If state universities or the less well endowed private universities adopt the publishing model for their research, they will lose top faculty, at least in the short run, to "cherry picking" by the best-endowed private universities, who quite probably will hold out longest against the inevitable changes ahead. Imagine how quickly full professors at the top universities will start job hunting as their teaching load begins to grow. Among the foreseeable effects of such a reform would be the concentration of nonwhite faculty—who, for political reasons, are so much more in demand than white faculty—at private institutions.

If massive change is indeed in store for all of the nation's universities and if an assault on faculty research time is inevitable, here may be a way to save nearly everybody's job in some form while still delivering a savings to the beleaguered administration.

Be that as it may, if massive change is indeed in store for all of the nation's universities and if an assault on faculty research time is inevitable, here may be a way to save nearly everybody's job in some form while still delivering a savings to the beleaguered administration. The difference between surgery and butchery lies in how much knowledge guides the hand holding the knife. The faculty have the knowledge, if they will but use it, to turn impending butchery into bearable and even useful surgery. It is within their power, in other words, to preserve a major commitment to research by making informed, sophisticated, personalized judgments—and making them over and over again, year in and year out—about what and whom to keep, what and whom to drop, what and whom to finance.

And if a side effect of such surgery is a heightened involvement of insular college professors in one another's work, that may be all to the good. As an editor for nearly seven years at the University of California Press, I often had the queer impression that academic departments, sometimes quite distinguished ones, were deferring to publishers when it came to the business of making judgments about their own colleagues, colleagues to whom they rarely spoke and of whose work they had little or no knowledge. The unwritten rules for tenure, in particular, were such that even if the department thought a young candidate was quite good, it couldn't award tenure unless and until we of the publishing houses saw fit to publish the candidate's book. But we knew that our decisions were affected by ever so many other factors than the intrinsic quality of the work. Even more dismaying was the sense we had at times—a hunch all too often, alas, borne out by the later sales performance of a given book—that were it up to the department to publish the nerve-wracked candidate's opus, were it their money that would go to finance it, the damned thing would never see the light of day. Not, please understand, that this negative judgment translated into a negative judgment about the work, much less about the worth of the author

as a teacher and colleague, just that there was only so much room on the shelves and in the daily schedule, and the *topic* in question was of marginal urgency. Not every good book is in any sense a necessary book.

Imagine how very different this situation—which still obtains—would be if the junior colleague were not only not required to crank out that book but, for budgetary reasons, not even *permitted* to do so. Or if permitted to do so, only permitted because his or her senior colleagues, having met and discussed the prospectus for the work to be written, thought it likely to be worth actually reading, as opposed to worth publishing for purely fetishistic, promotion-related reasons. In providing the time to write it, they would have taken subsidy money away from someone else who also wanted time to write, perhaps even sacrificed their own research time. Having done that, they would have far more than the current idle interest in the progress of the work.

Life on the campus of a major research university will obviously be different if and when it is understood that no one automatically has time off—not even the summer off—for research. A change of that sort will be furiously resisted. But if not this change, then what? The barbarian is at the campus gates, and "Productivity!" is his cry. My modest proposal is that those inside the gates start thinking now about what to shout back.

Jack Miles taught at Loyola University of Chicago and the University of Montana before becoming an acquiring editor at Doubleday and then executive editor at the University of California Press. He is currently a member of the editorial board of The Los Angeles Times, *where he frequently writes on higher education.*

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