



## *Inside View: Academic Profligacy*

Jocelyn Grecko, May 2, 2012

A veteran academic professional recently took the stage at a libertarian think tank to critique the profligacy of his former area of employment. Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, former president of George Washington University, recently noted at the Cato Institute that “On average, faculty and staff salaries comprise roughly seventy percent of the budget.”

He thinks the only way to address real reform of higher education is to look at the way a university operates. “A major university today – one that has over 15,000 students – will likely have an operating budget approaching a billion dollars,” he says. “Resource allocation isn’t simple.” Because of this, Trachtenberg suggests that reform is the only way to achieve goals within a university.

The first suggestion he makes is to increase faculty productivity and decrease the administrative staff. “The goal should be to increase faculty ‘productivity’ by twenty percent and lower the number of administrative staff by twenty percent,” Trachtenberg says.

He explains that most colleges hire junior faculty, and that by the time they are in their mid thirties, the university agrees to make a 40-plus-year contractual commitment with their faculty. “These lifetime employment contracts lock in higher ranking, higher-earning faculty – at a great expense to the institution on both a financial and programmatic level,” he says.

“This is a tragedy on several levels.” Trachtenberg believes that the productivity of professors will slow down as years progress. He also says that as they rise in seniority, they spend less time in the classroom.

In addition to this problem, there are too many universities that pride themselves on being major research institutions. Although this can be regarded as a good thing, a problem arises when this leads to a reduction in the number of teaching assignments. “Think of the irony. The dean says to a desirable candidate, ‘We really want you to come join us. You’ll hardly have to teach a class!’ What a message,” he says.

To Trachtenberg, the way to solve this problem is to separate the two groups of professors and researchers. One group would be rewarded for their classroom performance while the other would be rewarded for their scholarly activity.

Another suggestion Trachtenberg makes is “changing the academic calendar to three semesters per year. By adding another semester, productivity would rise, adjunct scholars would be reduced, and students could complete their degrees in less time, translating into less overall tuition.”

He also says that university life – albeit a good thing – has caused the cost of tuition to rise. This is because the professional staff has grown, “proliferating in these ever-expanding areas of university life.” It’s what he likes to call “a bloating in the number of professional staff.” He says it has occurred over the past 25 years. “The simplest way to address this is to set as a goal a reduction in the sheer number of staff by twenty percent.”

Trachtenberg recognizes the goals of higher education are to “pass knowledge from generation to generation... create new bodies of scholarship, writing, and art... and help a group of young people transition to fully independent adults and become responsible civic participants.” But he also understands that it is hard to carry on success when they feel burdened.

Universities will not embrace the concept of reforming their financial model until they reach a breaking point, Trachtenberg explains. He says that it would take a situation where several campuses shut down or their rankings changed before serious reforms would take place.

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