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Our Take

Devolution in Academia

Something momentous is happening in the nation’s colleges and universities while few pay attention. According to John Curtis, director of research and public policy at the American Association of University Professors, in 2009 68 percent of faculty jobs nationwide were part-time or contract, rather than tenure-track positions that have traditionally been the backbone of academia (Jeannie Keever, “Job-hunting with a PhD isn’t what it used to be,” *Houston Chronicle*, 15 October 2009). Non-tenure-track instructors make about \$20,000 a year, estimates Anne Heath-Welch, an adjunct at Kingwood College in Texas. She knows whereof she speaks: she is one of the untenured instructors.

A cleaning maid makes \$80–\$100 per day. Subtract holidays, sick leaves, vacations, and cleaning supplies, and you end up with what many instructors with doctorates get at our colleges and universities.

While this is going on, the salaries of top administrative officials at

universities have skyrocketed, often over fifty times higher than those of untenured instructors. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, over twenty universities paid their presidents over one million dollars.

Even in comparison to full professors who often retire without achieving a six-digit salary figure, top administrators are paid exorbitant salaries. In the “good old days” any professor could become dean or president of his/her university through election by his colleagues. There used to be a faculty vote for such positions. Presidents were scholars and not fundraisers or lawyers. Today the selection of university presidents is shrouded in mystery. The committee in charge is often appointed by the retiring president. There is no faculty vote.

While exorbitant bonuses and salaries at financial institutions have recently become the subject of scrutiny, academic salaries have not. Yet a disquieting disparity exists between the salary of a university president and that of a full professor, not to speak of untenured instructors. Is this disproportionate apportionment of rewards related to the devolution of standards in education? Frustration among the teaching staff at colleges and universities is high, and tenure becomes a matter of life and death—literally, as the recent tragic example of Dr. Amy Bishop at the University of Alabama has shown. At the same time, education seems to be relinquishing its previously held obligation of providing a modicum of scientific knowledge, acquainting students with historical facts, and teaching them the appreciation of artistic achievements of past centuries. Can a discussion be launched while those who profit from the system are in charge?