

Curtis Bowman

Another cog in the culture industry

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How the University Works

Although I'm no longer a professor, I sometimes blog about the problems confronting academia these days. Consequently, I thought that I should say something about a book that I recently read with great interest: Professor Marc Bousquet's [How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation](#).

If you're new to this blog and haven't read any of my autobiographical writings, especially my [academic autobiography](#), you should know that I spent ten years searching in vain for a full-time academic position after I received my Ph.D. in philosophy in 1993. In 2003 I left academia to become an independent scholar.

Given my past experience, I'm intimately acquainted with the sort of marginal academic life that Professor Bousquet describes so well throughout his book. It often comes as a shock to many people, especially newly matriculated students and their financially stressed parents, to learn that an ever greater percentage of faculty members are employed on a part-time basis, which translates into low wages, minimal to non-existent benefits, and a complete lack of job security. At many schools across the country at least half of the faculty are employed on such terms. It doesn't take much imagination to realize that the quality of classroom instruction must inevitably suffer, regardless of how well-meaning and dedicated these part-time instructors happen to be.

To Professor Bousquet's credit, he goes beyond the plight of part-time faculty to investigate the obstacles that many students face in their struggles to get a college education. As tuition costs have increased faster than the general inflation rate, more and more students are forced to take jobs as they make progress towards their degrees. In many cases these are work-study jobs provided by the very institutions at which they are enrolled.

But sometimes they work at businesses that have partnered with schools, neither of which seem much concerned with whether or not these students actually manage to get an education, much less a degree. Without a doubt, the most sobering portion of Professor Bousquet's book is chapter 4, in which he movingly portrays how such a partnership can lead to (and even seems designed to result in) the mistreatment of student workers at the UPS hub in Louisville, Kentucky.

Furthermore, it's just a fact that most work-study jobs don't pay enough to cover all of the costs of a college education, and so more and more students are forced to take on large amounts of debt. Unfortunately, many students in these circumstances never graduate, and so they leave school after fruitlessly accumulating debts that they still have to repay.

The growth of work-study jobs, as is to be expected, has come at the expense of full-time staff members, i.e., secretaries, library workers, and the like. Consequently, an ever greater percentage of staff-related work is performed by students.

All of this should sound familiar. After all, what colleges and universities have been doing for the past twenty-five years and more is to adopt a more corporate attitude towards their costs. Hence it's hardly surprising that they've attempted to introduce as many cost-cutting measures as possible, even though such steps obviously lead to a decline in the quality of the very institutions that cut costs in the above fashion. Such measures are really little more than a form of slow-motion institutional suicide.

But what is most remarkable about these cost-cutting measures imposed on faculty and staff is that they have not made a college education more affordable. Why is this so? In some cases, of course, they may have actually slowed the rate of growth in the cost of an undergraduate education at particular colleges and universities. For example, since state universities receive ever smaller percentages of their operating budgets from state governments, they have to figure out ways to contain cost increases.

Another distressing fact, one that works mightily against these cost-cutting measures, is that the decline in full-time faculty employment and the increase of student employment and indebtedness has been accompanied by a veritable explosion of growth in administrative employment. It's become so bad that some part-time professors make the switch to administration in order to have a full-time job.

Professor Bousquet does not say as much about administrative growth as he could have, and he certainly does not say nearly enough about the concomitant professionalization of higher education administration. The latter is especially important, I think, because of the careerism that inevitably attaches to any kind of professional activity.

No one with dreams of climbing the administrative ladder will approach his or her job with a conservative attitude. That is, no one can hope to move to a more prestigious, higher-paying administrative job simply by preserving the status quo. This is one of the main reasons for the seemingly endless but almost always useless agendas for change, the maniacal spending on new technology, and the like. Professor Bousquet, borrowing a phrase from David Brodsky, speaks of the "nomadic managerial hordes" (pp. 179-180), and so he is clearly aware of the problem I've just mentioned. But more could have been said about this topic.

One inevitable consequence of this careerism is that administrators will naturally move to reduce all possible resistance to their plans to change to their institutions. This provides them with another incentive to reduce the ranks of tenured faculty to a bare minimum. After all, part-time faculty who are afraid of losing their jobs will keep their mouths shut. No one can blame them for doing so, either. Once again, Professor Bousquet is aware of this issue, but he could have said more about it.

Given that I generally go in terror of English professors bearing theory -- read [this review](#) and [this review](#) for a few of my reasons -- I am happy to report that Professor Bousquet usually has his theory under control. Usually, but not always. For example, his discussion of the "informationalization" of the university (pp. 60ff.) does not strike me as being very helpful. To say that academic labor is delivered as if it were information, i.e., called up and dismissed as quickly as if it were a piece of information, seems to say no more than what we usually say about what it is to be employed on a part-time basis. Overall, however, Professor Bousquet's analyses tend to be lucid and to the point.

One final observation. In three places (pp. 14-18, 186-187, 200-206) Professor Bousquet discusses William G. Bowen and Julie Ann Sosa's *Prospects for Faculty in the Arts and Sciences: A Study of Factors Affecting Demand and Supply, 1987 to 2012* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). I had never heard of this book, and so I went to the library and checked it out. As Professor Bousquet points out, the Bowen/Sosa study was wildly optimistic in its prediction that the demand for new Ph.D.s would exceed the supply. We know, of course, that things turned out quite differently.

The Bowen/Sosa study is a grimly hilarious exercise in pseudo-scientific social science, filled with charts and figures purporting to demonstrate a thesis that never even came close to being the truth. I can only say that such talk was commonplace before the Bowen/Sosa study appeared in 1989. I can remember my father (who was a history professor at the University of North Texas for thirty-two years) telling me similar things in the mid-1980s (and I heard the same prediction in my first class as a graduate philosophy student at the University of Pennsylvania in 1986).

My father was part of a generation of academics who were then on the cusp of retirement. No one I knew at the time seriously thought that those in charge of higher education would reduce the number of full-time faculty so drastically. My father and his colleagues (who were hardly naive) never fully realized the extent to which those in charge no longer cared about the traditional mission of higher education and thus had other ends in mind. After all, wishful thinking can take many forms. Therefore, we ought not to be too hard on Bowen and Sosa for writing such a ridiculous book. They were simply expressing the conventional wisdom of the time. Fortunately, we have Professor Bousquet's clear-eyed book to help us to understand our current predicament.

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