



Faculty De-Professionalization and Organizing: A Report from the Trenches

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Abstract

This essay draws on the author's personal experiences at a public university in North Carolina to reflect on the implications of the de-professionalization of the professorate for academic organizing. It begins by considering the evolving contexts that have undermined professors' ability to organize: a declining demand for academic labor; the rise of university administrators with a distinct set of interests and professional culture; and professors' lack of solidarity and disinclination to advocate for their collective interests. Next, drawing on Laurence Vesey's classic history of American colleges, and particularly his insight that the academic profession has flourished historically largely because of the "incoherence" of institutions of higher learning, the essay argues that the "salutary neglect" that professors long benefited from is ending. As institutions strive for greater internal coherence, faculty autonomy is threatened. This is apparent in the policy implications of budget cuts, political interference, and cutthroat competition to enroll students. Finally, the essay argues that one possible solution to the problems of de-professionalization and professors' declining ability to organize is for faculty to reclaim the language of privilege. As French labor history illustrates, "privilege" was a term that once referred to special rights that guild laborers were accorded by virtue of their skills. Embracing the idea that faculty should reasonably expect special treatment (which does not mean that they should endorse unjustified social hierarchies) could motivate faculty to resist the troubling headwinds facing their profession.

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A basic reality of economic life is that, from time to time, certain jobs die. In his classic study *The Making of the English Working Class*, the historian E. P. Thompson spoke in moving terms about the fate of the handloom weavers in the early nineteenth century. The weavers had built an entire way of life around what proved to be no more than a transitional phase in the development of industrial labor. Thompson's attention to such laborers' efforts to resist proponents of inexorable "progress" led him, famously, to denounce "the enormous condescension of posterity" (Thompson 12).

In many respects, the plight of the twenty-first-century college professor does not seem so different from Thompson's story of handloom weavers. In both cases, a comfortable and meaningful way of life established itself on a form of labor that proved—or will soon prove—surprisingly short-lived. Indeed, it is entirely possible that the tenure-line college professor that emerged as a prominent twentieth-century profession may soon go the way of the nineteenth-century weaver. Both forms of work gave rise to a way of life anchored in well-defined communities, a sense of professional pride and achievement, and a modest but relatively stable standard of living. Yet each of these professions was impoverished, sidelined, and ultimately dismantled by new forms of economic organization that derided the older model as costly, inefficient, and backward-looking—an irritating obstacle on progress' glorious path. The consciousness of many contemporary professors, like those of nineteenth-century weavers, is "haunted by the legend of better days" (Thompson 269). We may be fast approaching the moment when many of the staples of academic life—"coming up for tenure," contentious department meetings, "writing lectures," and research seminars—will be as quaint and obsolete as the songs sung by the weavers to keep time as they worked—an historical "blind alle[y]" in a triumphal narrative in which "[o]nly the successful ... are remembered" (Thompson 12).

Of course, Thompson's point is that the destruction of the handloom weavers' way of life was a formative experience in the "making of the English working class" as a class conscious and (for a time) formidable political force. It is at this point that the analogy between pre-industrial laborers and college professors breaks down. For the academic profession is hardly on the cusp of a new era of activism. Indeed, the obsolescence of the academic profession (or at least of a significant subsection of it) has had a debilitating effect on traditional forms of organization and is likely to be a major impediment to faculty efforts to advocate for their interests. While faculty organizing still exists, it has been significantly impeded by the transformation of the profession (notably the substitution of full-time tenured faculty with part-time or contingent non-tenure-line faculty). How does one organize a dying profession? As a tenured professor at a state university, I have tried—mostly unsuccessfully. Though this essay offers no answers to this crucial question, it draws on my experience to consider the connection between

professionalization and organization, and the consequences of the decline of the former on the latter.

In attempting to make sense of my own limited involvement in trends in shaping higher education, I will focus on what have been, historically, the primary conditions of possibility of faculty organizing: the constitution of professors as a profession and institutions that recognize and respect this profession. From these starting points, I explore three interrelated claims. First, a number of factors have contributed, in recent decades, to the undermining of the academic profession and the ability of professors to uphold their professional status. Second, the academic profession, during its heyday in the twentieth century, was able to govern and organize itself (to a degree) because universities practiced a form of salutary neglect, allowing professors to pursue their work largely on their own terms so long as it did not overtly conflict with goals set by administrators and governing boards. A major trend in recent years has been the *end* of this salutary neglect, compelling administrators and boards, for a variety of reasons, to exercise more centralized control, in a way that has deprived faculty of their former autonomy. Finally, I propose a comparison between guild workers in prerevolutionary France and contemporary American college professors, showing how, in both instances, reformers attacked the “privileged” status of these two (very different) forms of labor. I argue that faculty should consider reclaiming and placing a positive spin on the rhetoric of privilege to advocate for their work, despite the inauspicious times.

My insights derive from my experience serving in various faculty advocacy roles between 2017 and 2022. I teach at a public university in North Carolina, where the state university system has become highly politicized ever since the Republican Party won control of the state legislature in 2010. I served as a faculty senate chair at an institution whose leadership believes that it is a pragmatic necessity to placate conservative forces. I also happened to hold these roles during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, between 2019 and 2021, when already existing tensions resulting from the Republican-dominated legislature’s agenda were brought to a fever pitch, notably when my university reopened (more or less) in fall 2020, despite the fact that many faculty (as well as many students and staff) felt threatened by this choice. Indeed, as a result of this decision, the faculty senate that I presided voted no confidence in the university’s chancellor (i.e. president), which resulted in a *de facto* but never formally acknowledged boycott of the senate by the university administration for my entire second year as chair. Around the same time, I was president of the North Carolina Conference of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). In 2021, the national AAUP issued a major report on the UNC System, which identified systemic problems relating to shared governance, academic freedom, and institutional racism. The report—as well as the AAUP’s subsequent condemnation of the UNC System (American Association of University

Professors)¹—attracted some attention at the state and national level. But at the end of the day, the report and the condemnation were quickly drowned out by the din of other national crises. The inability of the faculty to make its voice heard through a no-confidence vote and an AAUP condemnation—which, once upon a time, would have been regarded as alarm bells signaling genuine institutional crisis—have shaped my outlook to a significant degree.

The Changing Context of Academic Professionalization

A variety of factors have contributed, in recent years, to the undermining of the academic profession. The constitution of the faculty as a profession—particularly the right to make key decisions relating to professional governance—has historically been the primary vector driving faculty organizing in the United States. The gradual erosion of the academic profession is a problem in itself, but also has significant consequences for faculty organizing.

First, the ability of professors to organize effectively has been undermined by a declining demand for academic labor, particularly professionalized academic labor. Effective academic organizing is, in other words, strongly correlated to the demand for professionalized faculty. The evidence supports this claim in the affirmative as well as the negative. The takeoff period in American higher education occurred after the Second World War. Spurred by economic growth and the demands of a modern economy, an unprecedented number of Americans attended college. In 1940, 5.5% of American men and 3.8% of American women had college degrees; by 1973, the figures were, respectively, 16% and 9.6% (Statista Research Department). Furthermore, the federal government, during these years, invested massively in higher education, through such legislation as the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (or “GI Bill”), the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, and the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA). In this context, as universities were expanding, offering more degrees to more students, recruiting professional faculty became a priority. To offer a modern, state-of-the-art education and to compete with other campuses, institutions prioritized the recruitment of a professionalized faculty. Most importantly, this meant that administrators and governing boards tended to heed faculty’s own conception of what “professional” meant. Hiring faculty with doctorates and offering them tenure contracts (trends that were already advanced before the war) became the norm. By 1969, only 3% of full-time faculty were off the tenure track (Gerber 119).

The widespread demand for professional faculty encouraged and strengthened professors’ organization. Faculty organizations—the AAUP first and foremost—flourished and acquired an ability to set professional norms, many of which became, and remain, enshrined in governing documents and faculty handbooks. In 1966, the American Council on Education (for administrators), and the Association of Governing Boards

of Universities and Colleges joined the AAUP in issuing a “Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities,” which, while defining the academic institution as a “joint effort” (“Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities”) carved out an essential role for the faculty in institutional governance. It declared that faculty should have “primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process.” It stipulated that faculty should control appointments, tenure, and dismissals, adding that on such matters, governing boards and senior administration should “concur with the faculty judgment except in rare instances.” The faculty, moreover, should at minimum have the right to “participate” in the formulation of “policies and procedures governing salary increases.” Finally, an “agency should exist for the presentation of the views of the whole faculty”—typically, a faculty senate or council. Taking advantage of the demand for their skills, faculty in these years formed vibrant professional organizations, used these organizations and their market position to claim a role in university governance, and turned these governance practices into tools to advocate for their interests on an ongoing basis. Summing up this high moment of faculty power, the historian Larry Gerber writes: “The years from the beginning of the World War Two to the mid-1970s witnessed both the rise of American universities to a position of global preeminence in the world of higher education and the development of a broad consensus on the desirability of significant faculty involvement in institutional governance” (Gerber 81).

My own university’s history fully supports this correlation between the demand for professionalized faculty and faculty power. The institution that became Appalachian State University was founded in 1899 in a remote, mountainous region of northwestern North Carolina. It soon became a public university devoted almost exclusively to teacher training. In these early years, doctorates were enough of a novelty that professors who earned them were celebrated in the student newspaper (“Appalachian Professors Are Working Towards Doctorate”). In the postwar period, Appalachian brought itself in line with national trends. In 1963, President William H. Plemmons commissioned an Ad Hoc Committee on Faculty Graduate Study to investigate how many faculty had advanced degrees and how these numbers had changed over time. The committee found that while only 20 faculty out of 82 had doctorates in 1953, the ratio had risen to 55 out of 154 by 1963. The committee strongly encouraged faculty members to pursue Ph.D.’s (“Committee Recommends Faculty Graduate Study” 1). Prioritizing professional development in this way aligned with the institution’s long-term goals. In 1964, Appalachian’s Board of Trustees approved a plan to steer the university away from its focus on teacher training and turn it into a “multipurpose” college, offering a range of degrees and a wide palette of academic programs. The plan noted: “Qualified faculty members in academic departments are more easily

secured inasmuch as many persons prepared in academic disciplines perceive themselves in terms of disciplines which have an inherent independent status rather than that of a ‘service’ status to professional education” (“Trustees Approve Study Made on Liberal Arts College for Appalachian” 4). Clearly, Appalachian’s institutional priorities aligned with the standards embraced by the academic profession.

As the institution demanded qualified Ph.D.’s, it introduced and embraced shared governance. In this way, the administration acknowledged the faculty’s importance while also providing a mechanism for advancing their goals and interests. Appalachian’s Faculty Senate held its first meeting on May 12, 1967 (“Appalachian State Teachers College, Faculty Senate Record” May 12, 1967). As it prepared to be upgraded to a university status (previously, it was called Appalachian State Teachers College) and to be incorporated into a multiple-campus state public university system, Appalachian followed the lead of several other North Carolina institutions: the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Faculty Council was founded in 1951, North Carolina State University’s Faculty Senate in 1954, and East Carolina University’s in 1965. In an article in *The Appalachian*, the Senate was described as providing faculty with an opportunity for “direct participation in the processes of decision-making affecting the life of Appalachian”—language that remained in the Faculty Constitution for years. In the same article, the director of institutional research was quoted as saying that “the birth of a faculty senate is a pretty big step for a college of Appalachian’s nature” (“Faculty Senate” 1). In early July 1967, shortly after the institution formally became Appalachian State University, President Plemmons met with the Faculty Senate to discuss this change. He believed that the future would place greater “emphasis on the faculty,” a prioritization of graduate work, and “a need for top-flight people.” “The Senate,” he added “was counted a large potential factor in effecting these developments” (“Appalachian State Teachers College, Faculty Senate Record” July 6, 1967).

As the example of Appalachian demonstrates, the institutional prioritization of professionalized faculty aligned with opportunities for professors to advocate for their interests and sustain governance structures that allowed them to advance their interests on an ongoing basis. Needless to say, faculty face greater challenges in advancing their interests and sustaining effective governance structures when institutions are *not* invested in a professionalized faculty. Any number of contemporary trends contribute to institutional preference for a de-professionalized faculty. Because they can be paid less and terminated more easily, non-tenure track faculty may be prioritized at the expense of tenure-track faculty. An enrollment drop-off and accompanying emphasis on “student success” can lead to an almost exclusive prioritization of teaching—and specifically teaching aimed at pleasing and retaining students—to the detriment of scholarship and service responsibilities (with all that the latter entail in terms of professional status). Political pressures, particularly at public

institutions, can call into question faculty rights (notably tenure) that are denied to the labor force at large. At present, these and related trends have created overwhelming incentives to chip away at the professional status that faculty came to take for granted in the postwar years. Not only are faculty less able to organize, but administrations are less disposed to cooperate with faculty (whether organized or not), and institutions designed to advance faculty interests (like faculty senates) are becoming weaker. At Appalachian, in the wake of a contentious period of faculty-administrative relations that came to a head with the COVID-19 pandemic, efforts were made to modify the Faculty Constitution. Specifically, proposals were made that struck a passage that defined the Faculty Senate's goal as that of providing faculty with an opportunity for "direct participation in the processes of decision-making affecting the life" of the university—language that had existed in the Faculty Constitution since 1967. This proposal is currently on the verge of passing—by a faculty vote, no less.

Though I have emphasized dwindling institutional interest in a professionalized faculty, other factors have changed the conditions in which faculty are able to organize, generally in a negative way. Two deserve mention. The first is the curious phenomenon of the expansion of university administration—what Benjamin Ginsburg dubbed the "all-administrative university" (Ginsburg). This trend—out-of-control presidential salaries, the metastatic growth of administrative fiefdoms, the proliferation of vice-provostships and assistant-deanships—has been widely commented upon. But how does it relate to academic organizing? As I see it, the increasing importance of administrators has created a new, significant, and powerful constituency on university campuses with interests that are different from and often opposed to those of the faculty. University administration has always been hybrid work, requiring an ability to organize instruction, develop curricula, recruit and supervise students, work with governing boards, and manage business affairs, while also dealing with some of the idiosyncrasies that define American academic life, like college athletics and religious affiliations. For most of American higher education's history, however, university administrators were drawn primarily from the ranks of the faculty. This did not mean that they necessarily or even usually had a peaceful relationship with their faculty. But it did mean that administrators tended to appreciate and even identify with academic work and did, at some level, believe that universities were ultimately defined by their academic mission—specifically, teaching and research—even when administrators had to devote most of their day-to-day effort to tasks that were pragmatic, but which made academic work possible.

The growth of administration has disrupted this more symbiotic relationship with the faculty in several ways. First, administrators have acquired a caste-like consciousness through which they distinguish themselves from faculty, even when—as is still often the case—they began

their careers as professors. I became aware of this at my university when, in 2017, the University of North Carolina System (to which Appalachian belongs) issued a strategic plan that defined a dozen or so priorities, with the stipulation that chancellors on individual campuses identify several priorities that they would commit to achieving on their campus. My institution's chancellor, for instance, committed to rural enrollments, low-income completions, rural completions, closing low-income achievement gaps in undergraduate degree efficiency, and critical workforce credentials (Appalachian State University Five-Year Goals). Each year, the UNC System's Board of Governors monitored the institution's progress towards achieving these goals—and the campus itself devoted considerable resources (notably through administrative hires) to ensuring that these goals were met, and that this success was duly advertised. Chancellors' compensation and bonuses are directly tied to their ability to achieve these goals.

But rather than seeing this management technique as evidence of administrative venality or out-of-control administrative bloat, I am most struck by how it signals the emergence of a different professional culture within the university. I often described the website where the university trumpets its achievement of the System-mandated goals as the “chancellor's report card” or, more accurately, her annual report—of the same kind that I have to submit to my department chair each year. But whereas my annual report details classes I have taught, papers I have published, and committees I have served on, the chancellor's is a highly numerical report that focuses on enrollment numbers, student retention, and so on. Though her performance metrics do include things like degree completion and production, it has almost nothing to do, even at an aggregate or hierarchically superior level, with the type of work academics do, not even the aggregate scholarly achievements of the faculty. While there is some sense in which this has always been true of university administrators, it has not always been so to the same degree. At Appalachian, B. B. Dougherty, the university's founder (and, for a time, one of the longest-serving college presidents in the United States) would chair faculty meetings. Even until the 1970s, the university's president would list faculty publications and research achievements in his annual report to the Board of Trustees. Now, the idea that a governing board would be interested in what faculty actually do seems quaint, even silly. Boards and administrators view themselves as players in a great game—as higher education strategists, as the architects of their institution's imperialistic expansion, or, at minimum, as hard-nosed realists locked in a struggle to ensure their university's survival. What the little people do who fill the ranks of the faculty is of decidedly lesser importance.

This dramatic differentiation between the work of administrators and the work of faculty constitutes a serious obstacle to faculty organization. Shared governance procedures, faculty organizations, and concerns about professional status become seen by administrators as so

many impediments to the grand politics they feel compelled to pursue. These trends align broadly with the insight from labor history that the decline of models in which workers exercise considerable control over their workplace is often accompanied by “segmented” labor market, divided between an upper stratum of managers (or administrators) who are responsible for directing work and a lower stratum of ordinary workers (or professors) whose activities are increasingly repetitive and controlled (Gordon, Edwards, Reich; Edwards). At Appalachian, sustained faculty disgruntlement at the prospect of a return to in-person classes in fall 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, led the chancellor to announce that she and the provost would no longer meet directly with the faculty senate, a decision they upheld for the entire academic year. At the end of the day, upper administration did not want the business of reopening the university, which was seen as vital to ensuring high levels of enrollment that would preserve the university’s wellbeing, hindered by professors’ churlish whining.

The final obstacle to faculty organizing I wish to mention concerns the faculty itself—specifically, a mindset prevalent among faculty that may hinder their ability to act in their own best interest. The previous obstacles considered were objective—elements of the changing environment in which universities operate. This obstacle is subjective: the faculty’s downfall plays itself out not just in the world, but in ourselves—because we are underlings. By its nature, a mindset is difficult to characterize and even more difficult to establish with objective evidence. Still, its basic features can be painted with a few broad brushstrokes. First, academic work is not naturally susceptible to solidarity. Teaching and research tend to be solitary work, and hierarchical to boot. Committee work can be more collaborative, but it can also be competitive, and it is, in any case, generally devalued. Academic work tends to reward individuals who promote themselves, which also means promoting one’s field and even subfield in what is often a zero-sum game of allocating limited academic resources (money, time, and so on).

This leads to a second factor: faculty are extraordinarily status conscious. In academia, a line of work in which the monetary rewards are relatively modest (at least compared to other professions requiring a high level of education), success is measured by one’s standing and reputation. As in the military and the clergy, rank is constitutive of the academic profession. Most professors relate to their peers on the basis of a more or less explicit pecking order. A rare instance of cleverness I have seen on the part of my institution’s chancellor is the way she seems to require her staff to address all faculty using the honorific “doctor”—an insightful recognition of professorial vanity and the longing for recognition that accompanies it. In a profession organized on this basis, there are few natural incentives to think or act collectively, as status is diluted when it is shared. The only exception—and it is a significant one—concerns efforts to protect the profession itself—that is, to preserve the system in which

each faculty has a plausible chance to acquire the status and recognition they believe they can achieve.

The above-mentioned factors have long been part of the academic mindset. To these I would add another factor that is more recent or that, in any case, has become more apparent in recent years: faculty are often disinclined to advocate for themselves. Professors are typically civic-minded and socially conscious; yet despite these inclinations—and perhaps because of them—they are frequently averse to advocating for their own interests. This reticence takes several forms. Some faculty buy into what might be called the “student libel”—the notion that “it’s all about the students.” This claim is often advanced by administrators deliberately seeking to nip incipient professorial self-advocacy in the bud, on the preposterous grounds that faculty who seek to defend their profession are somehow harming students (one of the most effective organizing slogans I have seen is: “our work conditions are students’ learning conditions”). Even so, faculty can be susceptible to it. Second, professors often instinctively embrace a robust conception of equality, in ways that sit uncomfortably with the hierarchical structure of their profession. The resulting dilemmas can be quite genuine. On my campus (like many), the question of whether non-tenure track faculty should have the same voting rights as tenure-track and tenured faculty has given rise to considerable controversy. On the one hand, it seems unfair to disenfranchise non-tenure track faculty since their teaching is deemed of the same quality as their tenured colleagues (i.e., students do not get a discounted rate for classes taught by non-tenure track faculty). On the other, accepting equal voting rights on the grounds of equality makes tenure-track faculty complicit in the covert process to de-professionalize the professoriate by moving most appointments off the tenure track. In any case, the preference for equality can destabilize faculty’s consciousness of themselves as a distinct profession.

Finally, a well-meaning and in many ways admirable concern for social justice leads faculty to subordinate the defense of their own profession to more pressing, world-historical concerns, such as fighting racism and climate change. This is not to say that protecting the academic profession is more important than such epochal causes. Obviously, it is not. But professors can fail to consider that, if they are to continue engaging in such worthy causes, they must also make sure that the professoriate continues to exist. One can speculate about the reasons for this attitude—professors’ shame at their relative privilege, a sense of *noblesse oblige* that views self-advocacy as gauche. But its result is an unwillingness to engage in activism in the defense of their own profession.

The End of Salutory Neglect

The faculty’s declining professional status and its implications for organizing can also be considered a sign of the changing place of the American university in the broader society. Laurence Veysey’s *The*

Emergence of the American University (1965), offers a comprehensive and insightful history of American higher education and an acerbic account of the American university's peculiar "success." Though the colonial period and during the early republic had colleges—rigidly conservative institutions designed to inculcate moral attitudes rather than learning—the university proper began in the post-Civil War era, with the adoption of the European (and particularly German) model of institutions dedicated to higher learning and pure research. This fundamentally foreign ideal was grafted awkwardly onto Gilded Age society and sat uneasily with its hard-nosed, money-grubbing mindset. The purpose of these new and often expensive institutions that were founded in the closing decades of the nineteenth century was uncertain and, in any case, fiercely contested. According to Veysey, three distinct and largely incompatible ideals drove the post-Civil War university reform movement. The land-grant movement inspired institutions founded on the idea of utility, with a particular focus on agronomy and engineering, but also, more generally, on the idea that "any person [should] find instruction in any study" (as Ezra Cornell put it in 1868). Meanwhile, the imposing model of the German university system led to the founding of institutions focused entirely on research as higher education's primary goal—and even as an end in itself, distinct from teaching. Johns Hopkins, established in 1876, epitomized this conception of the university. Finally, in reaction to concerns about excessive utilitarianism or single-minded research, other universities began to promote the idea of disseminating culture—broadly, the liberal arts—as higher education's true purpose. In short, as higher education expanded, the purpose of universities became increasingly difficult to articulate in coherent terms.

According to Veysey, universities became fully American institutions by accepting that a fundamental disagreement existed over their purpose rather than resolving it. The "success of the American university" as it emerged in the early twentieth century was rooted in "its internal incoherence"—that is, in a "combination of interests" that are able to achieve relative harmony to the extent that they talk past and remain mostly ignorant of each other (Veysey 337). Universities sought to further the values and interests of the "urban middle class" and to meet their demand for practical education and opportunities for advancement in a capitalist society (Veysey 440). Yet at the same time, they also managed to nurture (particularly at the most prestigious institutions) a genuine culture of scholarship and higher learning, almost in spite of their recognized social function. Administrators, Veysey writes, "took pride in the accomplishments of their faculties, even if they did so in the manner of the neighborhood theater owner who never watches the films he books but keenly knows the drawing power of the actors" (Veysey 441). In the name of academic freedom, faculty advocated for "security, recognition, income, and power" (Veysey 393). But while they succeeded in achieving some of these goals, the struggle for power—for a faculty-centered

university—was most elusive: “Except for producing some unwieldy academic ‘senates’ and for encouraging somewhat greater departmental autonomy in the area of appointments, it bore little substantial fruit” (Veysey 393). What faculty gained instead, Veysey implies, was a form of salutary neglect. In the American university as it consolidated a century or so ago, “the scientist and the scholar could flourish, neither dominating the institution nor being too uncomfortably dominated by it” (Veysey 441).

Veysey provides an alternative—at once sardonic and sobering—to the myth of a “golden age” of higher education, in which administrators allegedly recognized the value of faculty insight on critical matters of university governance. For Veysey, shared governance, as it developed in the modern American university, was always a far cry from earlier (and failed) aspirations for real faculty control. Moreover, he sees shared governance as a modest concession to the faculty’s professional pride, resulting more from administrators’ indifference to certain domains of university life than from a genuine belief that university governance is a “joint effort.” Yet Veysey also, I believe, helps us to identify how universities have changed since the early-to-mid-twentieth century, where he ends his narrative. If the success of the earlier model universities was tied to its “internal incoherence,” the signal trait of the twentieth-century university is its aspiration for ever-greater *coherence*. Put differently, the awkward compromise that prevailed in the older model—between a university focused on pandering to students and alumnae, on the one hand, while tolerating the faculty’s desire for scholarship and learning, on the other—has been upended, as faculty have increasingly come under the direct control of administrators and boards. The salutary neglect that was once part of the implicit social contract of university life is ending, further undermining the already meager opportunities for faculty organization.

This trend towards greater institutional coherence and heightened control over the faculty has several causes. First, since the 1970s and particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the 2019-2021 COVID-19 pandemic, universities have faced never-ending budgetary challenges. To respond to these situations, universities have adopted a number of management techniques, often drawn from the business world. One such technique is program prioritization, which was first theorized in 1999 by Robert C. Dickeson, a former president of the University of Northern Colorado (Dickeson). In 2015, *Academic Impressions*, a higher education consulting firm with which Dickeson has been associated, defined the “challenge of program prioritization” in the following terms: “Colleges and universities of all sizes, types, and selectivity can no longer invest in academic programs and administrative services that are not critical to their mission or their market position, programs that in fact drain precious resources from star programs and limit the institution’s financial flexibility.” Consequently, “many institutions are engaging in efforts to rank and prioritize programs in order to reallocate resources from lower priority programs to higher ones” (“A Letter from Amit Mrig”). Facing a

forbidding budgetary environment, many institutions have adopted these strategies. Where once departments and programs could exist in relatively benign insulation from one another—consistent with Veysey’s idea of “incoherence”—program prioritization forces them to exist in a zero-sum environment. Each program is rendered acutely aware of its standing in relation to other programs and is forced to compete for limited resources.

In a similar vein, universities have, in recent years, been asked to determine the relative “return on investment” (ROE) of their academic programs. For example, in 2021, the North Carolina state legislature commissioned a return-on-investment study of the roughly 1800 programs offered across the University of North Carolina System’s 16 campuses, to be conducted by three firms (Deloitte, RPK Group and the Burning Glass Institute). The study was required to gather data on the number of students enrolled each program; the number of faculty and other staff employed by each program; the costs needed to offer the degree; a correlation between each degree and career prospects (notably income); and return-on-investment analyses on each program, state expenses, and student expenses. A UNC System administrator explained that the study would consider questions such as: “How many degrees are awarded, and how many students are actually impacted by those programs?” (Schlemmer). Like program prioritization, ROE seeks to create common criteria by which to evaluate academic programs, focusing on the measurable impact these programs have on students and taxpayers. In this context, it becomes increasingly difficult for faculty to engage *sub rosa* in scholarship and the residual forms of professional self-administration it implies. Every expense—salaries, faculty lines, course sizes, time—comes under the purview of administrators driven by cost-benefit concerns. Such trends also contribute to an academic version of the “deskilling hypothesis” explored by authors like Harry Braverman, which holds that workers lose control of the labor process as their work becomes less and less based on skill and they cede their former autonomy to an upper stratum of “mental” laborers (who, among other things, determine their labor’s value) (Braverman). The “incoherence” of universities that Veysey saw as their saving grace becomes, in an age of permanent budget crisis, inefficiencies that must be promptly resolved.

Another force driving the end of salutary neglect and furthering greater institutional coherence is political pressure, particularly on public institutions. Much has been made of efforts by several Republican-controlled state legislatures in the 2010s and early 2020s to curtail the perceived hegemony of progressive culture on university campuses, whether by protecting free speech (against “cancel culture”), limiting the teaching of “critical race theory,” and promoting greater “viewpoint diversity” (so that conservative students do not feel penalized). These efforts inevitably spark controversy and trigger indignant faculty to denounce threats to their academic freedom. Far more consequential, however, are political initiatives that make funding contingent on the

achievement of state-mandated “outcomes.” In many ways, these efforts are the result of a sustained campaign on the part of conservatives to argue that American higher education has become too costly and that public support for universities should henceforth be connected to their success in furthering specific goals—a campaign that has largely succeeded. To this end, state governments have increasingly required public universities to prioritize student retention, timely degree completion, and steering students towards jobs for which there is a recognized demand. In North Carolina, the UNC System recently adopted a new funding model that considers not only the student credit hours an institution generates them, but weights them based on “performance”—that is, the extent to which students are meeting goals set by the system’s Board of Governors (which itself is appointed by the state legislature). Significantly, chancellor salary packages are themselves linked to their institution’s success as defined by these measures. These state-mandated criteria also contribute to ending the salutary neglect that allowed faculty research and professional autonomy to flourish. And they have a much greater impact on academic labor than high-profile but ultimately superficial culture war initiatives aimed at “liberal professors.”

A final factor that is transforming the “incoherent” institutional structure that Veysey describes is enrollment *Realpolitik*, which reached a new level of intensity during the COVID-19 pandemic and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Preserving and enhancing student enrollment has become one of the primary obsessions of administrators and governing boards. The problem of enrollment is closely connected to the two previous factors, as university budgets often depend heavily on enrollment and politicians are frequently concerned with ensuring that public universities are financially solvent. During the pandemic, the UNC Board of Governors, as well as System and campus administrators, were alarmed by the prospect of students withdrawing and withholding their tuition if campuses continued to offer nothing more than online courses in Fall 2020. System leadership made it clear that all constituent institutions would reopen in the fall and that campus administrators would not have the discretion to close institutions for health concerns at will. Administrators also refused faculty requests that individual professors have the right to decide at their own initiative whether they would offer their classes in person, online, or in some hybrid format. Meanwhile, at other institutions (notably private ones), administrators and governing boards unilaterally suspended faculty handbooks and related provisions so that they could respond expeditiously to the financial challenges posed by the pandemic, many of which boiled down to enrollment problems. The impending “demographic cliff,” due to which an overextended higher education market will experience even greater competition for a dwindling number of students, is likely to exacerbate trends begun during COVID-19. The increasingly single-minded obsession of university leaders with enrollment will compel them to centralize decision-making, curtail faculty

autonomy, and bring under their authority matters they were once content to leave under the faculty's purview.

While Veysey encourages skepticism about the degree to which university governance was ever “shared,” his study does indicate how the institutional evolution of the American university managed to give professors a degree of autonomy (which contributed to the illusion that they exercised real authority): a degree of institutional incoherence that allowed faculty to pursue their priorities (primarily research) while benefiting from a degree of salutary neglect from administrators and governing boards. I have argued that a major trend in contemporary higher education is the obsolescence of the model Veysey describes and its replacement by a far more “coherent” institutional structure, based on a considerable extension of administrative supervision over university life and efforts to orient the university in all its organizational variety towards a limited set of priorities. The implications for faculty organization are significant, however indirect. First, this trend limits forms of autonomy that faculty had long taken for granted: departmental hiring practices, opportunities for research, control over scheduling, control over the curriculum, and even the awarding of grades have all, due to these developments, come under increasing administrative scrutiny. Though it was never very substantial to begin with, shared governance has become even more paltry as a result. The forms of organization and professional control that faculty had at their workplace has diminished accordingly. Nor is it surprising that more formalized instances of faculty organization—AAUP chapters or unions—find this new environment unpropitious as well.

Reclaiming the language of privilege

While I have argued that professors' have a meager capacity for organization, I would like to conclude with an historical analogy that suggests one way in which faculty might resist these trends—though its very outlandishness might do more to underscore the profession's dim prospects than to point the way forward. Professors, I maintain, should argue that they *are* privileged—and rightly so.

In making this case, I suggest a comparison between the current situation in American higher education and the final decades of France's Old Regime and the early years of the French Revolution—and specifically to attitudes towards labor during either period. In both instances, labor was organized through a system that gave workers the right to control key aspects of their trade: who could practice it, what professional norms should apply, and so on. In both cases, reformers maintained that the existing labor system was inefficient, expensive, monopolistic, restrictive, and contrary to the common good. The reformers made proposals to modernize the system that undercut the ability of workers to regulate their own labor practices. And in the case of prerevolutionary France, workers challenged these reforms by arguing that

the latter only appeared to serve the general interest—and, in so doing, the workers invoked the rhetoric of privilege. What if today’s faculty were to do the same?

From the Middle Ages to the French Revolution, labor in France was organized by the guild (or corporate) system. Guilds were woven into the essentially hierarchical fabric of old regime society: they occupied a distinct place in the social pecking order, and they, in turn, were hierarchically organized. Each guild existed by royal decree, which allowed a particular trade—cobblers or coopers, say—to formulate a self-governing document or “statute.” The rights defined in these statutes were considered “privileges” (*privilèges*). The historian William H. Sewell, Jr. (my main source for this account) writes: “Literally, *privilèges* were ‘private laws,’ that is, laws that applied exclusively to a single person, either to a collective fictitious person or to an individual ... To the extent that a collective or particular person was governed by private law, the person was necessarily given immunity from common law” (Sewell 27). A guild’s privileges included first and foremost the exclusive right to practice a trade, but also the right (and responsibility) of policing the behavior of guild members, ensuring the quality of goods produced, and the regulation of the training of apprentices—most notably the crucial step whereby a “journeyman” (an entry-level craftsmen) became a “master,” typically by demonstrating proficiency in his craft through the production of a masterwork.

Without rehearsing the history of the academic profession, it is hard to deny that it was founded on principles that broadly resemble the organization of skilled labor in old regime France. With the rapid spread of colleges and universities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American institutions made the Ph.D. the main criterion for access to the profession (drawing on practices developed in early nineteenth-century Germany), thus defining the conditions of access to their profession. Both the awarding of doctorates and academic tenure were based on the journeyman/master process, whereby an apprentice, following a probationary period, was admitted into the profession after demonstrating competency (with a dissertation, a form of “masterwork”) to the satisfaction of current professionals. Of course, this system operated in the framework not of a hierarchical society but of democratic-egalitarian one (at least in the sense of equality before the law). But the idea of a hierarchically organized, self-governed profession concerned with regulating the quality of its work and maintaining professional standards shaped the American academic profession as much as it structured skilled labor in prerevolutionary France.

By the second half of the eighteenth-century, the guild system was under attack. Inspired by Enlightenment-inspired thought, reformers criticized the guilds on a variety of grounds, most of which boiled down to the claim that they restrained economic freedom in a way that limited the nation’s wealth. In 1774, a prominent reformer serving as a minister to the

king issued a decree abolishing the guilds. The decree sought to ensure “to commerce and industry the entire liberty and the full competition which they ought to enjoy.” But as Sewell explains, the decree also blamed the guilds for limiting the practice of trades to those who had obtained masterships, imposing excessively long apprenticeship periods, saddling consumers with high costs (due to the guilds’ monopolistic character), and restraining innovation. The upshot of the decree was that any individual wishing to practice a trade simply had to declare their intention to do so to the local police (Sewell 72-73).

The movement to reform higher education does not perfectly match the anti-guild movement of the eighteenth century, but it does bear a family resemblance to it. The primary argument leveled against American universities by would-be education reformers is not their restrictions on liberty, but their exorbitant cost—though the debate about for-profit universities, which frequently side-step the professional norms found in more traditional institutions, does recall the pre-revolutionary debate about the consequences of disconnecting skilled labor from guild membership. Since at least the 2008 financial crisis, conservatives have made the high cost of college education a major talking point—and liberals have rarely fought back with any conviction. Though serious reformers do recognize that the reasons why higher education is so expensive are many, at least some have connected it to the organization of the academic profession, particularly the tenure system and the focus on research (which is roughly analogous to the early modern focus on skilled labor). Thus in 2009, an article on the American Enterprise Institute’s website declared: “While focusing on phenomena such as the overbuilding of palatial campus facilities, however, these accounts continue to pay short shrift to the factor most responsible for driving tuition inflation—the cost of tenure-track faculty” (Hess). As in the French case, reformers have emphasized the way their goals contribute to the common good, implicitly criticizing the status quo as narrowly defending faculty interests to the detriment of other stakeholders. This is evident in the discussion surrounding a policy adopted by the University of Georgia System in 2021 that was widely seen as a harbinger of the impending abolition of tenure as a higher education norm. The policy makes it possible to terminate tenured professors who “fail” two annual reviews and a subsequent professional improvement plan. A System representative commented: “The goals of the changes are to support career development for all faculty as well as ensure accountability and continued strong performance from faculty members after they have achieved tenure,” adding: “ultimately, we all have the same goal” (Heyward). This remark is striking—and typical—in the way that it not only takes for granted that tenure does *not* foster “continued strong performance,” but also gloats in its egalitarian rhetoric: subjecting senior tenured faculty to the same degree of scrutiny as junior or non-tenure-track faculty proves, in short, that the administration believes in *equality*—in a way that makes one nostalgic for the days when boards treated faculty,

with frank condescension, as “hired men,” without having to protest their progressive bona fides while seeking cheaper labor and greater market flexibilities. In short, like the French opponents to the guild system, contemporary critics of tenure maintain that they are pursuing ends that will redound to the common good.

In old regime France, not everyone was convinced by the reformers’ arguments against guilds. Indeed, the royal court that was responsible for registering the decree invoked a different conception of freedom to oppose the unfettered economic freedom espoused by the reforms. While freedom is all well and good, the court noted, it should not be conflated with “an unlimited liberty that knows no other law but caprice and admits no rules but those that it makes itself.” If it were, then liberty, far from being the “source of wealth,” would instead become “an occasion for fraud and plunder, and the inevitable result would be the total annihilation of the arts and of artisans, of confidence and of commerce” (Sewell 74). The decree was eventually rescinded, and the reformer who proposed it dismissed. Yet only a little over a decade later, the French Revolution would complete the reformers’ work, permanently abolishing the guild system. In addition to the arguments in favor of the guilds recognized by the court, it is also crucial to understand how important the idea of privilege was to early modern labor. True, privilege was inseparable from old regime society’s essential inequality. But inequality also meant that everyone (or almost) was privileged, in that they all had laws and standards that were unique to their place in the social hierarchy. As Sewell argues, this was particularly evident in the consciousness of skilled laborers. Owning a mastership ensured a “protected place in the market,” job security, and rights that could be passed onto one’s family. Though it was not capital, mastership was a form of property that “gave form and significance to the rest of the master’s property”; it was the “capstone of his possessions and marked his place in the social order” (Sewell 118, 119). Sewell’s thesis is precisely that, far from being a throwback to a bygone era, memories of the guild system, skilled labor, and old regime understandings of privilege continued to play a powerful role in nineteenth-century revolutionary ideology, even as the circumstances shaping working-class life assumed dramatically new forms.

Though a world of difference separates old regime cobblers from twenty-first century college professors, they share the fact that both organized their labor on guild-like principles and embraced the idea of privileged work in a context in which so-called progressive reformers were intent on presenting this older model as restrictive, conservative, and self-interested. Like prerevolutionary laborers, American college professors, in their heyday, believed that they were members of a profession who were entitled by virtue of their training to certain privileges (the right to train “apprentices,” academic freedom, participation in institutional governance) and who made these privileges, more than their economic

rewards, central to their identity. This conception of privilege was firmly rooted in older ideas about labor—the notion that certain distinctive rights follow from a particular type of training and professional accomplishment—and has little to do with the meaning that privilege has acquired in later periods (i.e., status and rights resulting from racial identity or wealth). This essay has suggested some of the trends that have coalesced to undermine the professorate’s professional status in recent decades. The fading appeal of the language of privilege as an idiom for justifying professor’s status is a further consequence of these developments.

Is it possible to imagine a rekindling, on the part of faculty, of this professional rhetoric of privilege at present? The times hardly seem propitious for such discourse. The right has, at least temporarily, succeeded in establishing the entitled, agenda-setting liberal professor as a prevailing stereotype associated with higher education, and the left has done little to challenge it. Reformist ideas about “job-ready skills,” “student success,” and enrollment growth—rather than quaint concerns about faculty professional standards and quality—dominate current higher education discussions. And for contemporary progressives—to whose ranks many faculty belong—“privilege” has become the common denominator for all that is wrong with the world, making its appeal as a rallying cry very weak indeed. Yet Sewell reminds us that, in the early years of the industrial age, many allegedly progressive economic reforms were made on the backs of workers, who, for this very reason, held fast to an older model of labor organization, even as they transformed it into a modern revolutionary language that vehemently criticized exploitative labor practices and their false pretenses. There are perfectly sound reasons for believing that the American academic profession is on its way out, that it will go the way of Thompson’s handloom weavers: a memorable and appealing moment in a profession’s history— but, ultimately, only a moment. Yet perhaps there is a way for the academic profession, even as it is relentlessly de-professionalized by the systematic recourse to non-tenure track contracts and the centralization of decision-making in the hands of administrators, boards, and politicians, to reclaim the idiom of privilege—giving new meaning to the value and dignity of academic labor in an age intent on making it a job like any other.

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