

The Disempowerment of Faculty in University Governance

Reviewed by Daniel J. Bennett, Assistant Dean (retired), UCLA

No University Is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom

Cary Nelson

New York, New York University Press, 2010

The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters

Benjamin Ginsberg

New York, Oxford University Press, 2011

At the 2011 annual meeting of the Council of Graduate Schools, in a plenary session entitled “Public Perceptions for Charting the Future of Higher Education,” Jeffrey Sellings, Editorial Director of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, noted that he had recently changed jobs at *The Chronicle*. While moving offices and his shelf of recent books on higher education, he observed how many of the titles reflected their critical nature. In my review of some of the recent literature regarding the state of the American university for *Perspectives* (see previous reviews of works by Louis Menand, and Ellen Schrecker and Mark Taylor in the Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 issues respectively), I find common threads of concern about the direction of the university, though the analysis and recommendations for change are different. In the two books under discussion here, both authors write about the disempowerment of faculty in university governance but through disparate approaches.

Cary Nelson’s latest book (he has authored more than two dozen, including the provocatively titled *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical*), *No University is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom* is an interesting and enjoyable read. Nelson is president of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and a professor of literature at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His mission here is “first of all to evaluate the state of academic freedom in the emerging neoliberal university and then an effort to judge what role the AAUP can play in preserving it.” Nelson sees academic freedom under siege and notes that those often unaware of the situation are the faculty who are most threatened by its loss. Thus, the book also is an effort to educate the academic community on the history and importance of academic freedom to preserve and protect scholarship, quality teaching, and ethics and integrity in the university. He begins with a discussion of the AAUP’s 1915 “Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure” and moves on to develop the case for “a more nuanced model” that accepts the notion that faculty are also employees and embraces collective action through unionization.

Central to Nelson’s concern for faculty is “the three-legged stool” of academic freedom, shared governance and tenure. Threats to these key elements are addressed chapter by chapter, most of which have been presented publicly during the course of his AAUP work and cover topics such as the “managerial style” and dominance of administration in governance of the university, the overuse of contingent as opposed to tenure track faculty, rogue political elements who wish to impose their ideology or cultural views on the university (e.g., David Horowitz and Students for Academic Freedom, Lynne Cheney’s American Council of Trustees and Alumni) and other economic and political threats arising from a declining economy and the war on terror and security concerns.

Nelson notes that even natural disasters are now being used as excuses for university administrations to seize absolute power. Following Hurricane Katrina, area college presidents:

swept aside academic freedom, shared governance, due process, and tenure ... In New Orleans, tenured faculty were fired with scant notice, no due process, no stated reasons, and no appeal except to the very administrators who terminated them....Departments and programs were closed down without appropriate review and without regard for shared governance or academic freedom. The schools used the excuse of Hurricane Katrina, but it is clear that no level of emergency existed that required the elimination of due process. Loyola suffered losses of about thirty million dollars, but its three-hundred-million-dollar endowment remains intact.

Nelson indicates that “As identitarian politics fragment and crisscross the categories of Left and Right still further, we now have even more versions of inner exile on campus than we have seen before.” He worries about the need to create a campus environment where all can express their views without fear and with civility. And, Nelson argues, while David Horowitz and others insist that the Left prevails throughout higher education in the U.S. and intimidates the Right into silence, “people on the Left are just as likely to feel besieged....Untenured and part-time faculty members feel vulnerable when they engage in progressive advocacy. Anecdotal accounts suggest that self-censorship, prevalent during the McCarthy period, has returned to shape faculty behavior.” In one of the better novels set within academia, Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man* (the movie based on the novel is considerably less successful in depicting the nuanced textures of academic life), literature professor George, the protagonist, admires Grant, the young physics professor who is an outspoken civil liberties and anti-war activist despite being untenured and having a wife and three children to support. George recognizes that academic freedom is more secure for the privileged and that “with his seniority, his license to play the British eccentric, and in the last resort, his little private income, he can afford to say pretty much anything he likes on campus.”

It is this shrinking, privileged world of secure faculty that Nelson is trying to enlist in the cause of saving academic freedom for all. He sees collective action on the part of faculty through unionization, advocacy, and activism as the appropriate response to threats to academic freedom. While some may not agree with his recommendations, Nelson’s analysis of the dangers inherent in current trends is well documented through an impressive bibliography and specific case studies, as well as cases he has mediated through his AAUP work. His discussion is well balanced, positing that both the right and left have constricted thinking on these matters and are jeopardizing the future of the university by failing to understand what is at stake and to work together for the common good.

By comparison Benjamin Ginsberg’s book, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*, is less complex, somewhat polemical and thinner on documentation. He blames most of the university’s ills on a bloated administration consisting of what he derisively labels non-faculty “deanlets and deanlings.” Ginsburg, a professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University, relies largely on headline articles in newspapers, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Education* to support his arguments. He also insists that what appear to be outrageous examples from his experiences at Hopkins and Cornell are typical rather than exceptional. For example, a former assistant dean at Hopkins who Ginsburg claims declared “event planning” an “academic skill” students need to possess, thus illustrating the destruction of the university through non-faculty administrators with too little to do and no understanding of what the university is about.

Most of us have stories of administrators we deem incompetent or unneeded, but we also know that the contemporary university requires modern management that includes public affairs, information technology, undergraduate and graduate enrollment management, development, alumni affairs, etc., as part of its structure. Ginsburg is not convinced. He dismisses the notion of the demand/need for more services and the increased number of students as accounting for the rise in administration. He similarly discounts the rationale that federal, state and other regulatory matters require more administrators, insisting that their proliferation is disproportionate to the number involved in such matters.

We also may share Ginsburg's concern about administration's overuse of acronyms, managerial buzzwords and theory. However, his approach and recommendations are too narrow and divisive for most of us to find viable. And it appears unlikely that he would support NAGAP: "Little would be lost if all pending administrative retreats and conferences, as well as four out of every five staff meetings (these could be selected at random), were canceled tomorrow." Ginsburg's anecdotes about his service on administrative committees at Hopkins indicate he is provocative. He records that in a confrontation with an assistant dean he was not polite, but "Contrary to campus gossip, though, I did not physically attack him."

While Ginsburg shares some concerns with Nelson (e.g., the decline of shared governance, the increasing reliance on adjunct faculty and threats to tenure), his analysis appears to be more sympathetic to right wing attacks against the university. Hence, his work contains the expected diatribes against administrative efforts to increase diversity and make the university a safe haven from racial, ethnic or gender/sexual orientation discrimination. For example, Ginsburg refers to Yale's LGBTQ community as "a tiny group of activists" not worthy of the expenditure of funds for a Resource Office. He brushes aside administrative concerns about a Hopkins fraternity party ("Halloween in the Hood") that included a skeleton hanging from a noose, chastising the university for characterizing the party as racially insensitive and for choosing "to interpret the unfortunate skeleton as a symbolic affirmation of the ideas of lynching black people." The legitimacy of stand-alone race and gender studies programs is once again challenged. While Nelson also is concerned about political correctness run amok (his chapter "Barefoot in New Zealand: Political Correctness on Campus" is both funny and serious), he is far more sensitive to the rights and concerns of a diverse campus population.

Ginsburg's position is that the faculty should run the university. While he acknowledges (and we know) that most faculty members do not want these responsibilities, he contends that it is because they find themselves powerless in the hands of professional administrators when they do take on such service. He fails to devote attention to the fact that the tenure and promotion process often fails to give weight to service (or teaching, for that matter) as opposed to research and publication, thus providing little incentive for faculty to assume administrative responsibilities.

Ginsburg's focus is more on private universities than public. For instance, he says that development has become big business for administrators because they gain more control by freeing themselves from reliance on faculty who generate student tuition through the creation of academic programs and enrollments. However, he does not address the situation for public universities, whose state support has dwindled and whose ability to raise tuition is limited by government and public scrutiny, thus requiring more professional levels of administration in development, and undergraduate and graduate enrollment management.

Both of these books are thought-provoking, and the topics they address are quite serious. As the late UCLA Chancellor Franklin Murphy said, defending his encouragement of academic freedom for students and faculty by

allowing controversial speakers on campus during the turbulent 1960s, “The University exists *not to protect* students *but to prepare* them. This is not a playpen. It is a university.” Nelson adds to that notion by emphasizing that while the university is not an island, it should offer the utmost protection of academic freedom to all who work and study in it. And Ginsberg’s argument that the faculty and academic interests should be foremost in determining the nature of the university is one that Chancellor Murphy and other outstanding leaders in higher education would support.

References

Davis, M. (2007), *The Culture Broker: Franklin D. Murphy and the Transformation of Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 90.

Isherwood, C. (1964), *A Single Man*. New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 86.