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Introduction: This is Not the Crisis You’re Looking For

Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth

It has become an iron law of American journalism that no one is permitted to write the word “humanities” in a sentence that does not also include the word “decline.” Case in point: in the summer of 2013 the American Academy of Arts and Sciences released a report, *The Heart of the Matter*, that sought to promote the humanities and social sciences as important objects of study alongside the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and more generally as part of a kind of American civic nationalism. What followed the release of that rather mild report was an almost surreal series of newspaper articles about the decline of the humanities, as if *that* had been the subject of the report. The general consensus was this: undergraduates have voted with their feet. Humanities professors have killed interest in their own disciplines, and declining student enrollments are the proof. In the words of David Brooks, *New York Times* columnist and member of the committee that produced the AAAS report, “the humanities are not only being bulldozed by an unforgiving job market. They are committing suicide because many humanists have lost faith in their own enterprise.”¹

Brooks’s account was but one version of a narrative that has dominated discussion of the humanities for over two decades. “A half-century ago, 14 percent of college degrees were awarded to people who majored in the humanities,” Brooks wrote. “Today, only 7 percent of graduates in the country are humanities majors.” The reason for the dramatic drop-off is that the humanities took

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up trendy and ephemeral matters, becoming “less about the old notions of truth, beauty and goodness and more about political and social categories like race, class and gender.... To the earnest 19-year-old with lofty dreams of self-understanding and moral greatness, the humanities in this guise were bound to seem less consequential and more boring.”

Likewise, in his 2009 *American Scholar* essay, “The Decline of the English Department,” William M. Chace, then the president of Emory University, noted that English accounted for 7.6 percent of all bachelor’s degrees in 1970–71, but only 3.9 percent in 2003–4. “If nothing is done to put an end to the process of disintegration, the numbers will continue in a steady downward spiral,” he warned.² In 2013, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Emory English professor Mark Bauerlein cited similar numbers, concluding, “English has gone from a major unit in the university to a minor one.”³ In November 2010, MSNBC anchor Tamron Hall remarked with alarm that “students wanting to take up majors like art history and literature are now making the jump to more-specialized fields like business and economics, and it’s getting worse.”⁴ A chart appeared on-screen. “Just look at this,” Hall said. “In 2007 just 8 percent of bachelor’s degrees were given to disciplines in the humanities.” In 1966 that figure had been 17.4 percent.

So everyone knows why tenure-track jobs have dried up and funds have evaporated: students have abandoned the humanities in droves. There’s only one problem with those insistent accounts of the decline of the humanities in undergraduate education: they are wrong. Factually, stubbornly, determinedly wrong. As it happens, there was a decline in bachelor’s degrees in English, just as there was a drop-off in humanities enrollments more generally. But it happened almost entirely between 1970 and 1980. It is old news. Students are not “now making the jump” to other fields, and it is not “getting worse.” It is not a “recent shift.” There is no “steady downward spiral.” It is more like the sales of Beatles records—huge in the 1960s, then dropping off sharply in the 1970s.

And why does that matter? Because many of the accounts of the decline of the humanities are tendentious, and they continue to distract attention from the *real* crisis. Even when they are ostensibly couched as defenses of study in the humanities, as Brooks's column is, they are attacks on current practices in the humanities—like the study of race, class, gender, and other boring things.⁵ Or the rise of “theory.” Or the study of popular culture. Or the preponderance of jargon. Or the fragmentation of the curriculum. Or your colleague down the hall, whose work you never liked and who is probably undermining the English major as you type. But most of the things blamed for the decline in enrollments happened *after* the decline in enrollments had stopped. Theory, race/gender/class/sexuality, jargon, popular culture ... these things were hard to find in humanities departments in the 1970s. They became part of the fabric in our end of campus in the 1980s and 1990s.

And then a funny thing happened in the 1980s and 1990s: enrollments crept back up a bit. Weirdly, no one at the time seemed to take any solace in this. All through those decades, people kept churning out essays about the decline and fall of English and the humanities. “In 1970 we were the biggest thing on campus,” we said. “We earned our swagger. Everybody jumped back when a humanist walked by.” *Seven point six percent of all degrees!* Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive. Nobody stopped and looked at the numbers more closely. No one took 1980 as a starting point instead of 1970. For that matter, no one pointed out that 1970 was a blip, an anomaly, a high-water mark that represented a swift and unprecedented boom in humanities enrollments (see Figure 1).

Today, even when someone acknowledges that blip, they *still* tell a story of constant decline. Thus Chace admits that from the late 1940s to 1970, English majors climbed from 17,000 to 64,000; “but by 1985/86,” he concludes, “the number of undergraduate English majors had fallen back to 34,000, despite a hefty increase in total nationwide undergraduate enrollment.”

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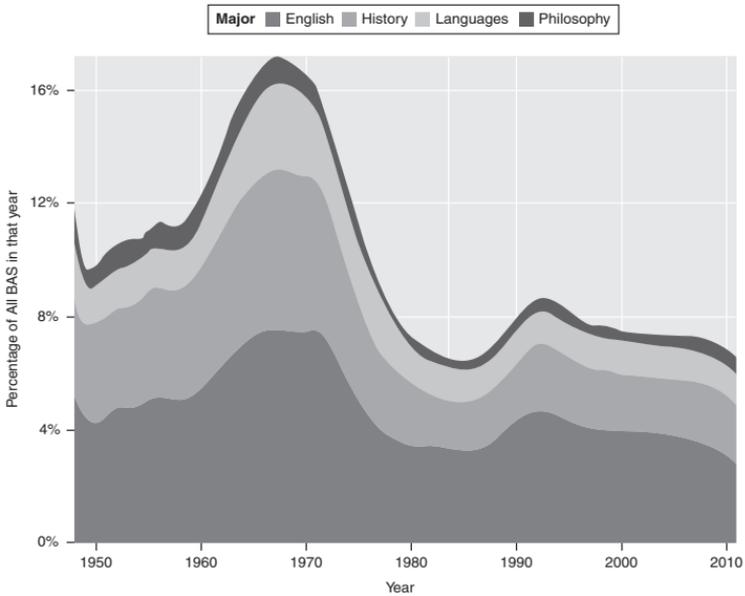


Figure 1 Humanities degrees boomed as a percentage of all degrees in the 1960s

Quite true. But by 2003–4, when Chace lamented that English accounted for only 3.9 percent of bachelor’s degrees, that number was 54,000—and he did not acknowledge as much. Why was no one writing about how the number of English majors grew by 20,000 over 20 years—almost a 60 percent increase?

Because the underlying lament is almost always about recent intellectual developments in the humanities, and the pre-cooked enrollment numbers are nothing more than a pretext for jeremiads. Thus in his 1999 *New York Review of Books* essay, titled (what else?) “The Decline and Fall of Literature,” Andrew Delbanco wrote: “Lately it has become impossible to say with confidence whether such topics as ‘Eat Me; Captain Cook and the Ingestion of the Other’ or ‘The Semiotics of Sinatra’ are

parodies of what goes on [at the annual MLA convention] or serious presentations by credentialed scholars.”⁶ Is it really so impossible, for a reasonably informed reader? The first title is from a work of fiction, a sendup of academe and its inhabitants. It is a very silly title. The second title is real—and not silly at all. On the contrary, “the semiotics of Sinatra” should sound like an entirely plausible topic to anyone who knows anything about the history of twentieth-century American popular culture. But then, in the 1990s it was never quite clear why so many distinguished critics had such trouble with topics most people would find wholly unobjectionable—as when Frank Kermode complained, in a 1997 essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*, about papers on such outlandish subjects as “the gendering of popular morality in certain nineteenth-century novels, the cultural politics of domesticity in a novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Mother in the Holocaust*, Toni Morrison’s feminized historical epic, and so forth.”⁷ One would have thought that literature, and literary study, was capacious enough to include such things—and that a critic as accomplished as Kermode would have been able to tolerate the notion.

Fortunately, Nate Silver, the statistician who has become famous for the accuracy of his analyses of polling data, weighed in on the inexorable decline of the humanities, and found that “the relative decline of majors like English is modest when accounting for the increased propensity of Americans to go to college.” Silver elaborated: “In fact, the number of new degrees in English is fairly similar to what it has been for most of the last 20 years as a share of the college-age population. In 2011, 1.1 out of every 100 21-year-olds graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English, down only incrementally from 1.2 in 2001 and 1.3 in 1991. And the percentage of English majors as a share of the population is actually higher than it was in 1981, when only 0.7 out of every 100 21-year-olds received a degree in English.”⁸ In a similar vein, Ben Schmidt showed in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* essay that the numbers get even more

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interestingly murky when you correlate them to the college-age population *and* extend them before 1967 (see Figure 2):

“percentage of all degrees” is a strange denominator. Taking into account the massive changes in the American university since the Second World War, it’s the resilience of the humanities that should be surprising. If you care about humanistic education, you shouldn’t be worrying about market share *inside the university*. You should care about the whole population. And while the 60s boom still stands out, we give out far more population-normalized degrees in the humanities now than we did in the 1950s or the 1980s.⁹

The argument is all the stronger for the visual and performing arts, though it is never made; the assumption, apparently,

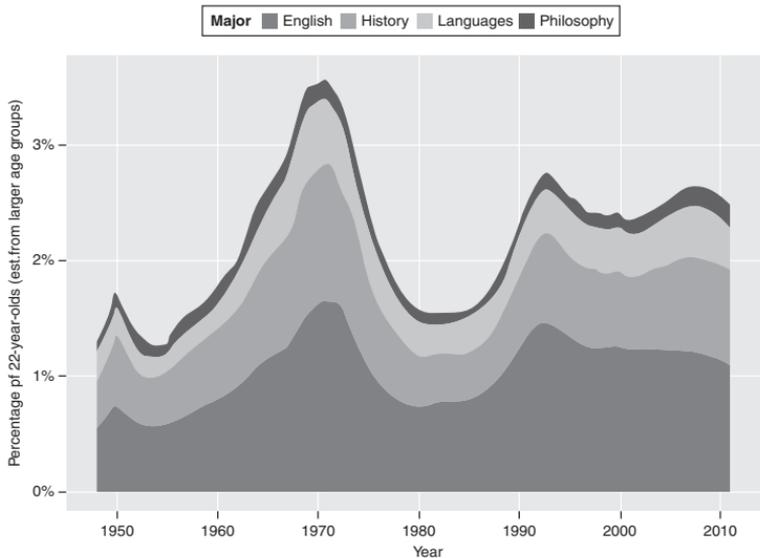


Figure 2 Humanities degrees as a percentage of the American college-age population

is that when SUNY-Albany announced program closures in French, Italian, Russian, Classics, and Theater in 2010, it was simply a harbinger of things to come, a selloff of dying and useless fields. But if you look at the Digest of Education Statistics, published annually by the National Center for Education Statistics (and referenced almost never by the “decline chorus”), you will find an extraordinary thing: in 1970, out of 839,730 undergraduate degrees, 30,394 were awarded in the visual and performing arts. By 2011–12 (the most recent year for which figures are available as we go to press), the number of overall degrees had more than doubled, to 1,791,046—but the number of degrees in the visual and performing arts had more than *tripled*, to 95,797. And yet, somehow, no one has noticed this. Obviously we must cut programs in dance and sculpture—they don’t contribute to the GDP, and nobody is taking those courses anyway.

It is true that there are individual institutions that have experienced recent enrollment declines in the humanities. One of the reports that sparked national discussion in 2013, for instance, was issued by Harvard—showing a decline in humanities “concentrators” from 21 percent to 17 percent over the period 2003–12. (That report also starts off, remarkably enough, by noting that “between 1966 and 2010, Bachelor’s Degree Completions in the Humanities halved nationwide, falling from 14 to 7% of all degrees taken.” As always, 1966 is the loaded-dice starting point.¹⁰) And in a 2013 *New York Times* article, Verlyn Klinkenborg reported that “in 1991, 165 students graduated from Yale with a B.A. in English literature. By 2012, that number was 62. In 1991, the top two majors at Yale were history and English. In 2013, they were economics and political science.”¹¹ For people who are inclined to take Harvard and Yale as representative of American higher education in general, these are surely alarming numbers.

But overall, the real narrative should go something like this: despite skyrocketing tuition rates and the rise of the predatory student-loan industry; despite all the ritual handwringing

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by disgruntled professors and the occasional op-ed hit man; despite decades' worth of rhetoric about how either (a) fields like art history and literature are elite, niche-market affairs that will render students unemployable, or (b) students are abandoning the humanities because they are callow, market-driven careerists; *despite all of that*, undergraduate enrollments in the humanities have held relatively steady since 1980 (in relation to all degree holders, and in relation to the larger age cohort), and undergraduate enrollments in the arts and humanities combined are almost precisely where they were in 1970.

Just as important, while all that was going on, the disciplines of the humanities responded to the world around them. *Mirabile dictu*, it turns out that race, class, and gender are actually matters of interest to millions of undergraduates, and queer theory, disability studies, and science studies have widened the purview of the humanities while enriching the graduate and undergraduate curriculum. None of this has sidelined any talk about truth, beauty, or goodness—but, rather, to the consternation of many conservatives (and many intellectually conservative liberals), it has complicated our notions of truth, beauty, and goodness precisely by bringing more voices into the discussion of such matters.

Indeed, as Christopher Newfield argues in *Unmaking the Public University*, that was the point of the culture wars of the 1990s: to attack and delegitimize “the study of race, gender, and sexuality, the humanities fields that did the bulk of the research and teaching in these fields, the students of color who seemed to benefit from them, and the universities that harbored all of these.”¹² In retrospect (and as some of us correctly argued at the time), the culture wars on campus were not distractions from the right's economic agenda, the agenda of privatization and of deep cuts in support for public universities; the two strategies worked hand in hand. As Newfield has it,

Privatization has systematically diminished the public university's distinctive features. One of these was top quality at a

low cost to the individual student and his or her family. The result of this synthesis was freedom to choose a field of study without overriding awareness of its future income potential. A further result was graduation with little to no debt, allowing the graduate from a low-income background to have the same shot as others at the freedom to take poorly paying but satisfying work, or a shot at international travel, or a shot at being a professional painter or dancer.¹³

Newfield is right about the culture wars, and right about privatization; the only thing missing from his otherwise brilliant analysis of how the defunding of public universities constituted an assault on the American middle class is an acknowledgment that despite it all, undergraduates keep dreaming of being professional painters and dancers, as the numbers of majors in the fine and performing arts show us. It is odd, is it not? Why, one would almost be tempted to conclude that the arts—and, to a lesser degree, the humanities—have some intellectual, creative, and emotional power after all.

And so the obvious question asserts itself: if the numbers are so much less alarming than we've been led to believe, why do scholars and teachers in the humanities continue to talk—persistently, strenuously, even obsessively—in terms of “crisis”?

There are two reasons, we think. One is that there are plenty of scholars and teachers in the humanities who have been inured to the idea that they are being systemically ignored, misunderstood, and/or devalued. This is understandable enough; they walk across campus and see the gleaming new Business Administration building, the sparkling, beautifully equipped Center for Nanotechnology and Advanced Bioengineering, and the gorgeous new stadium, arena, and student activity center—and then they trudge into their ancient cubicle in the dilapidated, un-air-conditioned Arts and Humanities Building, and they grumble to themselves about campus priorities. Or, depending on their temperament, they take a perverse comfort

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in their place at the bottom of the funding food chain, telling themselves that people just don't appreciate the finer things in life, such as the study of the monuments and artifacts of human civilization—worth more, ultimately, than any amount of filthy lucre or creature comforts. These people are a ready audience for the “decline of the humanities” narrative, because it confirms for them what they are already wont to believe: they are surrounded by philistines, Know-Nothings, and annoying businessmen from Porlock.

For most professors, though, it is not resentment or self-pity that makes the decline narrative so compelling. It is the fact that the narrative *feels right*, inasmuch as it attempts to account for the pervasive, sinking feeling that something is very much amiss. Among humanities professors and graduate students, there is a keen sense that even if there is no immediate crisis of undergraduate enrollment, there nonetheless is a crisis. It is a crisis of graduate education and professional employment, and though it is not confined to the humanities—it is now endemic to higher education in general—it is often felt to be most pronounced in the humanities. It is also, relatedly, a crisis of funding, of prestige, and of legitimation. And whether this crisis is experienced as disorganized malaise or diamond-tipped rage depends largely on the person's employment situation. Because the crisis is not one of disappearing students. It is one of disappearing tenure-track jobs. Too many people have been snookered into thinking that the jobs disappeared because the students did; we have written this book to put that canard to rest once and for all.

* * *

We believe ours is something more than the standard-issue “defense” of the humanities, or of the liberal arts tradition in higher education more generally (which would of course include the physical and social sciences—everything that is not

a narrowly designed “vocational” program). The book is partly that, particularly in the following chapter, but we think there are enough of those out there. Helen Small’s *The Value of the Humanities*, to take one example, offers a painstakingly careful and measured assessment of the genre. We believe that the real crisis is that the profession of college teaching has been drastically deprofessionalized over the past 40 years, and that college teachers need to find ways of making this case to the general public—without suggesting that the legions of teachers off the tenure track are not doing professional-quality teaching. We want to explain to people who may not know what a provost is, or who don’t use the word “decanal” in conversation, what *this* crisis looks like.

So what are these “three necessary arguments” of our subtitle? They go something like this. The first two are familiar in some precincts of the academy, but not all—and very rarely get an adequate hearing outside. The third is wholly unacknowledged, and sheds new and disturbing light on the first two.

One, the humanities are in fine shape, insofar as their intellectual value is concerned. We don’t agree with every last thing every single person in the humanities has written or said over the past 40 years, but on the whole, the disciplines of the humanities are home to exciting and ambitious work in both emerging and traditional fields.

Two, while all this exciting and ambitious work has been going on, the profession of college teaching has been hollowed out as full-time, tenure-track positions have been converted to highly precarious positions (both full-time and part-time) that offer no possibility of tenure—which means, basically, all the job security of Wal-Mart or McDonald’s.

Three, the deprofessionalization of college teaching has had consequences with which no one has fully come to terms—in academe or out. These consequences have unsettling implications for the future of graduate programs and for the mundane but important business of running academic departments. They

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are complex and contradictory and hard to fix, and we will elaborate on them in Chapters 2 and 3; suffice it to say here that massive hiring off the tenure track has effectively foregone systems of professional review for college faculty.

Here's how these three arguments came together. In the middle of the summer of 2013, as I was wading through the latest spate of decline-of-the-humanities essays, Jennifer wrote to me on what might seem to be an unrelated matter: a policy statement from the American Association of University Professors, recommending that all “contingent” faculty (we will explain the terminology, which is surprisingly complicated; for now we will use “contingent” to designate everyone not on the tenure track) be included in campus governance. The policy is a strong attempt to address a dire situation: at many universities, contingent faculty have no say whatsoever in any aspect of the way their departments or campuses are governed, so they are subject to potentially capricious hiring (and firing) practices. However, as Jennifer pointed out, since we are talking about faculty who effectively have no academic freedom—who can be punished or fired for any reason, usually without recourse to appeal or review—it is problematic to argue that they should serve on committees where their opinions and comments may well alienate the person or persons who hired them. Jennifer knew that I am an advocate for the rights of contingent faculty, and that (alongside my interest in disability studies) I focused my year as president of the Modern Language Association on their working conditions—even though the president of the MLA, and the MLA more generally, has nothing more than a bully pulpit when it comes to the working conditions of contingent faculty.

This conversation was punctuated by a series of essays that Jennifer wrote for the well-regarded academic blog *Remaking the University*, run by Michael Meranze and Christopher Newfield.¹⁴ And at some point, I realized that I was corresponding with a former department chair who had actually reversed the trend toward the casualization of academic labor in her own

department; who had successfully fought for tenure-track lines and successfully undone some of the under-the-table deals enjoyed by some of her faculty; and who was writing important essays about the experience. Asking her to co-author this book was an easy call.

For the most part, my experience has been that of an advocate in national organizations, though I have worked on my own workplace, as well. I helped rewrite the bylaws of the Penn State English department not long after my arrival in 2001, to ensure that our non-tenure-track faculty could not be capriciously demoted or fired, and that they had recourse to regular reviews as well as an appeal process when they disagreed with a review. I also serve on the Faculty Senate at Penn State, having been elected in 2012. But other than that, my experiences in this wing of academe consist mostly of my work with the national AAUP, leading two investigations of universities closing programs and firing tenured faculty, and writing a report on the role of the faculty in conditions of financial exigency. And, of course, writing essays and giving talks about the state of the humanities. Jennifer, by contrast, has done the critical but almost always invisible work of running a department, negotiating with deans and provosts, coming to terms with the stubborn fact that we have evolved a two- or three-tier hiring system in academe: one tier involves national searches, careful vetting processes, and rigorous peer review. The other two are almost entirely ad hoc, involving short- and long-term contingent faculty hired (and fired) almost any old way. The short-term faculty are often referred to as “adjuncts,” and we will employ that designation here, differentiating them from the long-term, full-time faculty off the tenure track—but considering both groups as “contingent” faculty.

Jennifer and I decided on the following division of labor: we each would write on the state of the profession as we have seen and experienced it. Sometimes our voices are combined, and sometimes they are distinct. We hope that for the most part, *who* is talking *when* will be clear and that the pronoun shifts are

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not distracting. (The order of our names below the chapter titles in the Introduction, Chapters 3 and 4 shows who wrote most of it. Michael wrote Chapter 1 solo and Jennifer wrote Chapter 2. In Chapter 4, we hand the baton back and forth, and indicate when we are doing so.) Before we get to the nuts and bolts of what has gone wrong in the academic labor system—and how to set about fixing it—I take one more chapter to address the actual substance of work in the humanities in the past few decades. Too often, when I have rebutted the enrollment argument, I have been met with complaints that the numbers aren't really the point—the point is the sorry state of humanities departments in the United States, filled as they are with second-rate ideologues and incomprehensible cliques. I do not want that complaint to go unaddressed, not least because I have a visceral intolerance for second-rate ideologues and incomprehensible cliques. I just don't agree that American humanities departments are filled with them. I do, however, agree that the explicitly political attacks on humanities departments, over the past few decades, have helped to delegitimize new work in the humanities—precisely as they were designed to do. We then concentrate on the crisis of deprofessionalization—what it looks like from the inside, what it means for higher education, and how we can begin to turn it around. Chapter 2 is Jennifer's, and everything else is both of us, with some single-voiced sections scattered throughout. The Appendix consists of recommendations Jennifer and her colleague Amy Greenstadt have proposed for transitioning Portland State to a majority tenure-track professoriate, and that we think can be generalized well beyond Portland State.

Now a few words about what we hope to do in this book and why. The employment situation in academe is this: contingent-faculty members now make up over one million of the 1.5 million people teaching in American colleges and universities—about 70 percent of all faculty. Many of them are working at or under the poverty line, with an average salary of about \$2700 per

course, without health insurance; some of them, as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported in 2012, are living on food stamps.¹⁵ These faculty members have no academic freedom worthy of the name, because they can be fired at will; and, when fired, many remain ineligible for unemployment benefits, because institutions routinely invoke the “reasonable assurance of continued employment” clause in federal unemployment law even for faculty members on yearly contracts who have no reasonable assurance of anything.

In 1970, the situation was reversed: more than 70 percent of college professors had tenure. Since then, ever-increasing numbers of students have been taught by an ever-decreasing number of tenured faculty. *That* is the real story of the relation between student enrollments and faculty jobs, and the numbers are staggering. In 1947—the good old days, before race, class, and gender ruined everything—there were 2.3 million undergraduates enrolled in American colleges and universities. In 1972, that number was 9.2 million. That 25-year period after World War II is widely understood as an unprecedented boom, demographically and economically, followed by years of retrenchment and stagnant waves. But on campus, the boom just kept booming—to the point at which enrollments broke the 20 million mark in 2009, and have remained there in the years since. And yet that continued growth in undergraduate enrollment has not been met with a commensurate investment in higher education. On the contrary. State legislatures have drastically reduced support for their colleges and universities, offloading the costs onto students and their families, redefining higher education as a private investment rather than as a public good. In the University of California system, for example, in-state tuition was \$300 as late as the year 1980 (out of state, it was a whopping \$360). Today, it is over \$11,000. We regard this as nothing less than an intergenerational betrayal: the people whose educations were subsidized in the 1960s and 1970s, the Boomers of the boom years, graduated, became taxpayers, lobbyists, and legislators,

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and decided not to fund the system from which they benefited so dramatically.

It is routinely asserted that the current state of affairs, for academic jobseekers, is the result of an overproduction of PhDs. Like the claim about undergraduate enrollments in the humanities, this claim is usually presented as self-evident, and is followed with some loose talk about “supply” and “demand.” And like the claim about undergraduate enrollments, it is very wrong. As Marc Bousquet has been arguing for years, the faculty workforce is made up of hundreds of thousands of people who do not have a PhD—which, we would add, effectively calls into question the function of the PhD as a credentializing degree for college teaching. (That is why the deprofessionalization of the professoriate has consequences for graduate programs.) The National Study of Postsecondary Faculty was discontinued in 2004, but as of then, 65.2 percent of non-tenure-track faculty members held the MA as their highest degree—57.3 percent in four-year institutions, 76.2 percent in two-year institutions.¹⁶ There is no reason to think that those percentages have gone down in the past decade, and every indication that they have risen. To wit, there are many factors affecting the working conditions of adjuncts, but the production of PhDs isn’t one of the major ones.

These numbers have implications that go far beyond the usual debates about the size of doctoral programs, because they illustrate how inadequate it is to think that we can solve the problem of contingent faculty simply by advocating that everyone be converted to the tenure track. Precisely because adjuncts are so invisible, even to the tenured and full-time non-tenured colleagues they work among, it is not widely understood that many of them have held their jobs—at one institution or at many, on a year-by-year basis or on multiyear contracts—for ten, 15, 20 years, and more. (Indeed, one of the most heart-breaking stories about adjuncts in the past few years involved one Margaret Mary Vojtko, who died destitute at 83, having lost

her \$2556-per-course adjunct job after teaching at Duquesne University for 25 years. She received no severance pay, no pension, nada. Her case is extreme, and very complicated, but notable nonetheless.¹⁷) Uninformed people tend, we have found, to speak of contingent faculty in two ways: either as bright, energetic 30-year-olds who enliven their departments and disciplines, working in the trenches for a few years before getting their first tenure-track job, or as professionals with day jobs in other lines of work who agree to teach a course at a local university for pin money. That part-time, informal arrangement for people who have other sources of income (be they actors, entrepreneurs, tinkers, or tailors) is the original function of adjunct faculty, and offers the only legitimate rationale for paying a college teacher less than \$7000 for a college course; the Modern Language Association recommendation is for a minimum of \$7230 for a standard three-credit course, and for a teaching schedule of six courses per term—for a very modest annual salary of \$43,380. (Most adjuncts teach eight courses or more.)

The situation is complicated further by the terms of art by which institutions designate contingent faculty. They can be called “instructors” or “lecturers” or “visiting assistant professors” or “professors of the practice”—or pretty much anything. There is no universally agreed-upon designation for contingent faculty; there are even contingent faculty who do not want to be designated by the term “contingent faculty.” By contrast, on the tenure track, an “assistant professor” almost always designates someone who has not yet earned tenure; an “associate professor” almost always designates someone who has earned tenure (in very rare cases, people have been tenured while retaining the rank of assistant—cases too rare to be important); and “full professor” almost always designates someone who has risen from the rank of associate by means of a national or international system of peer review, to promotion at the highest rank of the faculty (leaving aside further striations in rank, including “distinguished” professorships and endowed chairs; these

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do not come with any formal promotion in rank beyond that of full professor). And there is no correspondence between a contingent-faculty member's title and his or her rank or degree of job security. As a result, some contingent faculty are effectively long-term, full-time, non-tenure-track faculty working on multiyear contracts for decades; some are hired on an annual basis by one institution, year after year (until they are summarily let go); still others, informally known as "freeway flyers," cobble together an existence by teaching at two or more different institutions in an area—a course or two here, a course or two there. This is by far the most precarious form of academic employment, though it must be said that all contingent faculty are in a sense "precarious," and all are subject to the fluctuating employment needs of their departments—which means, in many cases, that they are not informed about what they will be teaching until mere weeks (or days) before the start of classes, or (even worse) not informed that they will not be teaching at all until mere weeks (or days) before the start of classes.

To make matters even more complicated still, while many (if not most) contingent faculty would prefer positions on the tenure track, some would not—as they repeatedly informed me during my time as MLA president. This is so for a variety of reasons. Some faculty actually teach off the tenure track voluntarily: some prefer a teaching-intensive position to a position that includes requirements for research and service, or, as one creative writer said to me, "don't you go dragooning me onto your campus committees—and I will do my creative work on my own time, thanks." Some were hired into full-time, non-tenure-track positions as part of spousal/partner arrangements in which the spouse/partner works on the tenure track. Others, including some of my non-tenure-track colleagues at Penn State, report that they chose to seek full-time positions off the tenure track because it allowed them to decide where they want to work—namely, here. (The tenure-track world, by contrast, ordinarily gives job candidates about as much control over their

geographical location as military recruits have—namely, none.) There are positions among these that no doubt should be continued (with more job security) for all kinds of programmatic reasons, but if we are to reform a system most of us agree has fallen into serious disrepair, the status quo needs to be challenged. All qualified applicants should have an opportunity to apply for positions, and the majority of positions must have access to the academic freedom the tenure system makes possible. This book hopes to explain why.

More controversially, this book will attempt to explain *how*. We propose that many full-time faculty lines off the tenure track be converted to *teaching-intensive tenured positions*. The tenure process for such faculty would involve rigorous peer review, conducted by their tenured colleagues at the same institution, but would carry no expectations for research or creative activity. (We have set out the procedures for these conversions in the Appendix.) The controversial part is that not everyone now teaching as contingent, adjunct faculty would be equally eligible for conversion to the teaching-intensive tenure track. In the course of this book, we distinguish sharply between faculty (on or off the tenure track) who are hired in competitive regional or national searches and faculty (always off the tenure track) who are hired locally by means of random ad hoc procedures that are answerable to no one. Getting college faculty back on the tenure track, we believe, involves eliminating as much random, ad hoc hiring as possible, thereby diminishing the amount of faculty hiring that works as a patronage system and increasing the amount of faculty hiring that abides by nationally recognized standards of professionalism. Moreover, our proposal would give priority to faculty who have completed the doctorate, on the grounds that (a) the doctorate is the appropriate credential for tenured faculty (except in fields where the MFA is the terminal degree, as is the case with creative writers or fine and performing artists) and (b) we are currently producing cohort after cohort of new PhDs who are dumped into a system

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staffed by thousands of faculty who do not have PhDs. That is the structural cause of the crisis in graduate education.

As you might imagine, current graduate students, recent PhDs, and adjunct faculty members with PhDs will find a great deal to like in this plan. Full-time non-tenure-track faculty without terminal degrees, especially those who have been teaching for many years, will be far less enthusiastic. And, of course, not every institution of higher education will agree with the proposition that the terminal degree should be the necessary credential for a job; community colleges, especially, tend not to hire PhDs precisely because they associate the degree with research rather than with teaching. We have no illusions about the difficulties involved with our proposal, and no delusions that it will meet with universal acceptance by faculty or by institutions. And of course, we believe that faculty who have been teaching for many years off the tenure track, whatever their degree status, deserve the benefits of academic due process; such faculty should be given greater consideration than faculty who have been teaching off the tenure track for only a few years.

But we strongly believe that no one is facing these problems squarely. Not only has no one proposed a fix for the people-without-PhDs problem identified by Bousquet; no one has even acknowledged that the vast majority of off-track hires follow no established procedures. The result is that the profession of teaching in colleges and universities has been eroded by unprofessional hiring practices—and none of us has been eager to admit that *all of us* engage in those practices, not just overpaid central administrators. Deans do it, department heads do it, even educated PhDs do it. And as a result, there are entire departments with majority-contingent faculty who will resist our proposal because it is “elitist.” But of course, if you don’t believe that a profession should abide by professional hiring practices, you have nothing to complain about when your profession finds itself deprofessionalized.

And finally, there is the question of why the general public should care about any of this. If you read any online essay about contingent faculty in *Inside Higher Ed* or the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, you will quickly find, in the comment section, that (a) the higher-ed press is read avidly by people who hate professors, and (b) relatedly, there is not a great deal of sympathy out there for adjuncts making \$20,000–\$25,000 a year. Especially since the near-meltdown of 2008, things have been, as the phrase has it, tough all over. It is accordingly harder than most exploitatively underpaid college professors might think to tell people that many college professors are exploitatively underpaid. It's a particularly tough sell in communities already devastated by prolonged economic hardship. But it might be possible to play on the still-widespread belief that college professors are professionals, and that parents who are sending their children to college should have some expectation that professors have the professional resources—offices, phones, mailboxes, email and library access, meaningful performance reviews, protected participation in department governance—that make it possible for them to do their jobs well. It might even be possible to do this without construing students as consumers and parents as aggrieved consumer advocates demanding that they should get what they pay for. The analogy, instead, should be to the ideals and practices of professionalism: if you need an attorney, and you go to a firm that fobs you off on an associate who has to consult with you in a hallway because she doesn't have an office, would you stand for that? Is it OK that your kid is going to a college that treats its faculty that way? Or think of it in terms of what a college promises and what it practices. Is it telling students that a college degree is a pathway to the middle class, while *paying its own instructors, with postgraduate degrees, food-stamp wages?*

This line of argument seems especially necessary when one stops to consider the primary concern most people have about college—that is, its cost. College tuitions at both public and private universities have outpaced inflation for many years; at

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public universities, the tuition hikes are largely attributable to the decades-long withdrawal of state support for higher education, while at private universities the increases have more to do with prestige and facilities. At both public and private universities, however, there has been a dramatic expansion in the administrative and managerial ranks—and in administrative salaries. (In this, too, academe is far from alone.) Not surprisingly, student debt has soared over the past ten to 15 years. Taking on the student loan industry is the task of another book, but we hope it will suffice to say two obvious things here. The first is that the debt apologists are fond of claiming that average undergraduate debt—now over \$25,000—is no more onerous than buying a car. But of course, the young graduate might still need to buy a car; and as my firstborn child, now 29, pointed out, \$25,000 will get you a very nice car by the standards of the average 22-year-old. (“I could buy two Kias for \$25,000,” he suggested.) The second thing is that when you are saddling 22-year-olds with \$25,000 in debt—and it is a special, venomous kind of debt, undischageable even in bankruptcy proceedings—you are giving them a powerful incentive to study subjects that (seem to) promise very quick returns on investment after graduation.

The arguments about money are necessary, because few people outside academe understand that these hefty increases in tuition have actually gone hand in hand with the seismic shift away from tenure-track faculty and toward low-wage contingent faculty. But there is another critical principle at stake here, as well. We need to tell people that non-tenure-track faculty members need a measure of job security and academic freedom if they are going to be able to do their jobs *at all*. This is dicier than it may sound at first: it amounts to telling parents, students, administrators, and legislators that they have to fight for the right of professors to challenge their students intellectually, free from the fear that they will be fired the moment they say something unfamiliar or upsetting about sexuality or evolution or American history or the Middle East. This argument will surely resonate with people who understand what higher education is all about, and

who are long-term supporters of PBS, NPR, or the ACLU. They are a subset of the American electorate, but they know why academic freedom is essential to an open society, and they believe in the promise of higher education. The question is whether they can be persuaded that the promise of higher education is undermined when 70 percent of the professoriate is made up of people who can be summarily fired for upsetting the wrong person.

By contrast, there is probably no way to make the case for tenure and academic freedom to people who oppose tenure on principle. The past 40 years have witnessed sustained and largely successful attacks on all forms of job security and organized labor, with the result that the union members are a tiny percentage of the American workforce and public school teachers have come under withering assault by charter-school merchants and their many allies in the media. When such people read that over 70 percent of American college teachers have no substantial job security and are being paid subsistence (or sub-subsistence) wages, their response is not “my gosh, that’s terrible—higher education is one of our most important assets as a nation” but, rather, “good! Now let’s get the other 30 percent.” But there is a curious strain of anti-elitism on the left that plays into this logic as well. It goes something like this: *it is wrong for college teachers to claim special privileges for themselves, such as “academic freedom.” College teachers are part of the workforce at large, not special snowflakes that require extra protection. There is nothing college teachers need—in material or intellectual terms—that every other worker in the world does not need.* This aspirationally egalitarian argument, we think, badly misunderstands the nature of academic freedom and the nature of college teaching; and we will address it when we talk about the role of contingent faculty in campus governance.

* * *

“It is sometimes said that society will achieve the kind of education it deserves. Heaven help us if this is so,” University of Chicago President Edward Levi said in 1970.¹⁸ Levi didn’t

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say what such an education would look like, though it might well look like the one we have today. In 2015 higher education reflects the inequality of American society: a widening divide between the academic quality of the elite and that of the ordinary institutions, between well-compensated executive teams and an army of contingent professors, and between wealthy undergraduates and those shouldering crushing student debt. Universities under intense economic pressure, threatened with one fiscal challenge after another, seem to be inconceivably remote from the genteel world Levi sketched in 1970, a world suffused with “the magic of a disciplined process, self-generating, self-directing, and free from external constraints.” This ideal of academic freedom, Levi continued, “describes a central thrust carried forward at particular times by enough scholars and enough institutions to have had a pervasive influence.”¹⁹ Our argument here is that despite the incredibly hostile conditions it now endures, this ideal is alive and well—and represents the only way to reverse the deprofessionalization of the profession. It is an ideal whose seemingly precarious life is renewed every time its extinction is predicted. The value of a university degree may be in question today; but the university’s legitimating principle, the idea and the ideal of academic freedom, is not.

This book charts a path out of the curdling academic labor system and toward a world in which academic freedom serves the public good. We may not be able to convince legislatures to reinvest in higher education, but we can rebuild a faculty free from external constraints, a profession whose members need not fear termination simply because one irate student (or one irate parent, or one irate donor) lodges a complaint. We can revamp the tenure system to make it as applicable to teaching-intensive positions as it is now to those conventional jobs bundling teaching, research, and service. The university’s legitimating mission—the passionate pursuit of insights and queries, free of coercion from church, state, or market—is as worthy an ideal as it was when the American Association of University

Professors was founded one hundred years ago. And in the following chapter, we'll give you some specific reasons why the humanities are central to that mission.

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