

Administrative Overload Contributes to Faculty Fatigue

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John Ramsbottom, Social Science
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Truman State University is a good place to work. My former Division Head told me that it would be, and he repeated it to other faculty whenever the opportunity (or need) arose. In my case, he was right. I know that he was right even as I prepare to leave after thirteen years.

The fundamental traits that make it a good place have not changed over that time. The students are of high caliber generally, and the best are the equal of any I expect to encounter. There is considerable freedom in the classroom and positive encouragement to experiment with teaching. Restraints on faculty freedom are largely self-imposed. If we choose to offer some courses instead of others, it is largely out of the belief that our students will be better prepared as a result. It is a particularly attractive place for young academics. The classes are often much smaller than they were used to teaching as graduate students. There is built-in support for travel and research. An atmosphere of questioning our progress prevails. The answers are not uniformly reassuring, but the question is always on the table. Many faculty members find this situation preferable to complacency and stasis. They believe, rightly, that they can make a valuable contribution to the institution's culture and success.

Is there nevertheless something wrong with this picture? The recent loss of several faculty members from the tenured ranks has caused alarm about

“faculty attrition.” These departures could of course be viewed as the predictable “turnover” among a cohort of faculty initially hired within a fairly short span of time. Turnover of this sort is at some level an insoluble problem--or perhaps not a problem at all. But the marked response to it suggests a more substantive cause for concern--an ongoing “attrition” among those who continue to work and teach at Truman. In short, the morale of the faculty, veteran and incoming alike, is becoming the central issue.

The very fact that the phenomenon has been characterized as “attrition” rather than “rejuvenation” is worrying. There is the sense that the foreseeable outflow of experienced faculty could turn into a flood, depleting the essence of liberal arts culture. Last year's AAUP study revealed no more than average turnover at Truman, but individual instances of it are seen in the worst light. Likewise, the recent inquiries into salary levels, spousal privileges, daycare, health coverage are worthwhile efforts to address real concerns, but they are also symptoms of an underlying discouragement.

There may, in fact, be a conflict between the way faculty are hired and the expectations the University wishes to place on them. For many years, Truman has benefited from a job market that brought energetic, talented scholars to campus, people who could reasonably aspire to a position at any institution in the country. Truman's faculty is

“youthful” in more than simple chronological terms; half have arrived in the past five years. A youthful faculty, whether truly young or not, does age and mature, however. Few of them are planning to spend their entire careers at one institution, regardless of its quality. These people are independent-minded. They regard themselves as members of a scholarly community outside Truman, and properly so. They outgrow the novelty of teaching in new ways, despite the best efforts of Faculty Development to challenge them, and eventually look for other avenues to participate in the life of the University. Are there such opportunities available?

One traditional option for mature faculty is administrative service (historians in particular seem to take over the running of colleges). But because administrative posts at Truman have no stated term and do not typically allow the incumbent to return to the classroom, they are attractive only to those contemplating a permanent change of career. Most liberal arts colleges deliberately avoid this predicament by rotating faculty through decanal and department head positions; whether this can work at Truman is unknown; it has never been tried. In any case, the number of such positions is notoriously limited.

The result is two-fold. The existing administrators are badly overworked, and the faculty (or more precisely, a minority of faculty) perform an immense number of essentially administrative tasks without significant recognition. Retreats occur, committees are staffed, task forces write reports. This is the “dark side” of continuous assessment and exclusive faculty control over the curriculum. Campus-wide events—the Undergraduate Research Symposium, Portfolio reading, and yes, Planning Day, to name a few—bring together

professors and students for productive interaction. Along with the administrators and their (underpaid) staff, faculty members play a key role on these occasions. Finally, many of these same faculty, often on the point of losing their own sense of scholarly and professional direction, are called upon to “orient” their new colleagues. It might be said that this service to the university mission is voluntary, and to be sure, those who feel most strongly about the mission are most likely to accept it. But the larger issue is whether such service brings with it any incentive to *remain* at Truman rather than moving elsewhere.

In short, the University appears to be in the position of expecting faculty to undertake what they are *not* trained to do at the expense of what they *are* trained to do. Initiatives such as merit pay and release time might make the situation more palatable, but it’s not clear that ‘rewards’ can or should be used to compensate for this unbalanced workload. Having embraced “lean administration” as a guiding principle of the institution rather than as a strategy that is subject to periodic review, Truman implicitly requires its faculty to take up the inevitable slack. Much of this time-consuming work cannot be quantified, and there appear to be no guidelines for apportioning it beyond asking for volunteers. Add to this the (laudable) peculiarities of Truman’s mission and the vagaries of Missouri politics, and you have a recipe for systemic confusion and exhaustion.

Truman is a good place to work, and so far it is a good place *to have worked*. Those who leave will have been well served by their time here, having refined both their teaching and their scholarship. Some will even find their administrative service interesting enough to consider a career change. But they might well

choose to do it elsewhere, because the positions available at Truman make demands that are beyond the capacity of even the most dedicated workaholic. Perhaps it is time to seriously reconsider the role of administration at Truman. Instead of being seen as antithetical to the University's academic mission, a numerous corps of skilled and sensitive administrators should be viewed as essential to its continued evolution. Whether recruited internally or from outside, committed professionals need to be found to provide practical guidance, logistical support, and informed praise for the efforts of the faculty. Having such a group is worth the investment, and it is a logical, even crucial next step in Truman's development.

In the meantime, the academic employment market is slowly improving. Truman may not continue to get the attention from job-seekers that it has enjoyed for over a decade. Its established reputation, however, will go on attracting scholars who want to teach good students—and *this is the highest calling in liberal education*. Moreover, the combined result of older faculty moving on as younger ones arrive could be to maintain the relatively "youthful" image of the University—an asset in an era that does not especially value armchairs and tweed—not to mention strengthening its long-term financial health, since an institution less generously endowed with full professors will be more economical to run.

This adds up to a bright future for Truman, provided that it shows confidence and imagination in coping with its mid-life crisis. A mature university should not be overly concerned about the loss of faculty who seek to fulfill their own personal and professional goals by moving on. But it does need sufficient administrative leadership and

staff to ensure creative follow-through on the promising ideas that naturally arise from an excellent faculty and student body. Truman has that kind of people here now; it should make the most of them.