Past Imperfect

By CHRISTOPHER P. LOSS

A YEAR AFTER I landed my first tenure-track position, in 2007, the recession struck and the bottom fell out of higher education. Ever since, it's become part of the conventional wisdom that the sector is undergoing a great disruption, that the bubble is about to burst, that the end of college, as we've known it, is near.

Like many faculty members, I've found myself worrying about the future of our profession and whether the once great American university can survive all the maladies that have stricken it: funding cuts, rising costs, student debt, administrative bloat, the twilight of tenure, the list goes on. I've also found myself pining for the good old days and wondering: Is higher education doomed? Or are we in the midst of one of the great transformations in its history?

Doubters have been predicting the end of college ever since there was college, and then turning their skepticism into calls for its reconstruction. Every generation on the lookout for evidence of precipitous educational decline has had no problem finding it. Back when Harvard (founded in 1636) and the College of William & Mary (1693) were the only colleges in British North America, a faction of disgruntled Harvard refugees, alarmed by their alma mater's flagging Puritanism, founded a school in New Haven to uphold the faith. The same schismatic cycle that resulted in Yale (1701) was likewise responsible for the six colonial colleges that followed.

Thomas Jefferson, a devout deist, would have none of it. During the Revolution, he grew disillusioned with the colonial colleges, especially his alma mater, William & Mary, which he now considered a monarchical relic corrupted by "priestcraft" and tyranny. The new nation, he believed, needed new schools, born of liberty, to educate republican citizens. As governor of Virginia and later as president, he pressed, unsuccessfully, for a national university and helped establish West Point (1802). His lasting monument to arts and letters was his design for the University of Virginia (1819). It embodied his Enlightenment belief in secularism and freedom, right down to his plan to make the library, housed in the Rotunda, rather than a chapel (there wasn't one), the spiritual center of his "academical village."
The limitations of the old-time denominational college and its classical curriculum did not become apparent until after the Civil War, when, in the span of 25 years, the rise of research universities radically transformed the order of learning in the United States. A small band of education reformers led the charge with the financial backing of Gilded Age tycoons who viewed universities as fitting tributes to themselves. Whether it was spun from an existing college, as at Harvard, under Charles W. Eliot, or cut from whole cloth, as at Cornell (1865), under Andrew Dickson White, and at Johns Hopkins (1876), under Daniel Coit Gilman, university building turned out to be a patchwork affair.

These president-reformers regarded the German university and its dedication to pure research as the ideal type. But that ideal was rarely, if ever, achieved on this side of the Atlantic. The longstanding tradition of undergraduate instruction combined with the uniquely American demand for useful knowledge, codified in the land-grant-colleges provisions of the Morrill Act of 1862, to say nothing of benefactor preferences for practical education, imbued the American university model with a diverse mission that included research, teaching, and public service.

Notwithstanding the lingering ivory-tower fantasies of the university as a place to explore truth for truth's sake, the real aim of the institution turned out to be somewhat more down to earth. The businessman-turned-university-founder Ezra Cornell, on the occasion of the opening of his namesake institution, said it best: "I would found an institution where any person could find instruction in any study.*

As-demand for access to higher learning climbed in the early 20th century, these divergent aims — original inquiry and mass education — created a rift between professors and students that left both parties mourning the loss of personal relationships that they now recalled as a virtue of the long-gone denominational college. Poorly paid faculty members, who earned the same as skilled industrial workers, bemoaned the decadence and sparsity of the typical undergraduate and the precious time that teaching took away from scholarly work. Students had their own array of discontents: Classes were too big and the faculty too aloof. "It was quite possible to attend a class three hours a week for a year [in the early 1890s]," recollected one student, "and not have even the remotest conception of the personality of the man behind the desk."

Faculty members and students did see eye to eye in their mutual disdain of administrators. For students, administrators were little more than well-dressed professors sent to enforce all the paternalistic rules (dress codes, curfews, fraternization policies) that Greek-lettered "college men" loved to break; for faculty members, administrators were traitors in the ranks, bureaucratic functionaries hired to do the bidding of the president and the deep-pocketed "captains of industry" who really called the shots, as the economist and social critic Thorstein Veblen memorably put it.

Veblen's one-time employer, Stanford University (1885), which dismissed him in 1909 after a string of scandalous affairs with "girl students," served as fodder for his withering critique, The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men (1918). Founded as a memorial to their son by the Southern Pacific railroad magnate Leland Stanford and his wife, Jane Lathrop Stanford, the university had earned its curbside corporate reputation. The Standards took a keen interest in hiring — and firing — faculty members, particularly Mrs. Stanford, the sole trustee of the institution for 12 years after her husband died, in 1899. She had no appetite for disobedience or faculty politicking when those policies crossed her own laissez-faire views. So when, in the combustible season of 1900, an outspoken sociologist named Edward A. Ross publicly announced his support for unionized labor and municipally owned utilities, Mrs. Stanford, smelling "socialism" in the air, had him ousted. From a long-range perspective, the Ross case encouraged faculty unionization in support of academic freedom, but at the time it was just another reminder of the drudgery of professional work.

For most of today's professors, a hundred years ago is ancient history. When slashed budgets and political meddling stir up anxieties about the future of higher education, we take refuge in memories of the more recent past. Those memories have been seared in the academic imagination, repackaged and handed down from departed colleagues old enough to recall how the GI Bill "democratized" higher education and "the Bomb" ended World War II, and how the fashions that followed led to the greatest expansion in access to higher education the world had ever seen. P Jessy reminiscences recall a "golden age" when tenure-track faculty jobs were plentiful; socially engaged undergraduates filled classrooms; the steady flow of public support for research and student aid kept everyone happy; the liberal arts were valued and teaching still mattered; merit meant something; and college athletics was really an amateur affair. Those were the days. Right?

The luster fades, however, when you look beyond the remarkable growth in public funding, enrollments, and ensured faculty lines that we still marvel at today. On closer inspection — when you consider the institutionalized white-male privilege of the GI Bill; or the routine breaches of academic freedom in the name of national security; or the dubious morality of military research; or the violent tendencies of the student antiwar movement; or the bald-faced racism, misogyny, and homophobia that pervaded campuses; or that the entire enterprise was propped up by a colossal war state — the so-called golden age doesn't look so golden.

Where does this leave us? For starters, it compels us to reflect on the ways we are better off now than we were then. Before you throw your hands up in protest, consider that there are more high-quality two- and four-year colleges and universities, with uniformly stronger and more productive faculty, in closer proximity to more students, than ever before; that technological advances are creating exciting possibilities for individualized and mass instruction the world over; that student, faculty, and administrative ranks are growing more diverse; and that students have more choices for intellectual and personal expression, for selecting majors and joining clubs and disclosing one's identity, than at any time in the history of American higher education.

Does this mean that higher education is on the cusp of a transformative epoch? Could a real golden age be coming? Nobody knows. But I do know that we'll never solve our own problems if we fail to grasp the larger historical patterns of continuity and change that connect higher education's past to its present. Until that happens, we'll forget that faculty work has always been challenging, that student indifference is not new, that business and government are necessary partners, that teaching and research have always existed in tension — that, in short, the university's imperfections are what drive us to make it better.

To Find Happiness in Academe, Women Should Just Say No

By RENA SELTZER

I work with some of the most brilliant women on the planet: academics at leading colleges and research universities.

My coaching clients succeed early in their careers by working hard and saying yes when opportunities came their way. But by the time they come to me, their schedules are killing them. A case in point is Diandra, who called in despair, exclaiming, "I'm surrounded by great colleagues, I have smart, motivated students, and I can study topics that excite me, but it's just too much. Every day I'm sure I'll be able to work on my writing tomorrow, and then my day is completely full and I fall into bed exhausted, and I still haven't opened my manuscript."

Diandra's difficulty in finding time for research and writing is a challenge that confronts academics at all career stages — and women in particular. Other academic duties come with near-term deadlines. The lecture must be written before class on Monday, the applications must be read and ranked before the meeting on Wednesday, the report must be submitted to the granting agency next week. Professors put off work on their own articles or books until they can find the time, but the time never comes.

My previous career as a therapist in a college town led me to coach professors. When I work with someone like Diandra, who is drowning in commitments, the first thing I do is issue a challenge to find 10 things to say no to. I explain that they can accept, decline, or counteroffer. Decide agreed to try for five. How many would you be able to find? In addition to obvious ones, like turning down an invitation, you can use delaying tactics. Thus, a decision not to rewrite last year's lecture, sitting on your hands when the department chair asks for a volunteer to pick up a cake, or postponing a student meeting all count as no.

When she called the following week, Diandra had found four times to say no and was contemplating a fifth. She told her students they could skip a reading, which meant that she didn't have to read the article herself; she decided not to travel over a holiday break; she decided against attending a conference; and she skipped part of a department-sponsored program. She was also considering postponing a collaborative project with a local company, although it would provide opportunities for her students.

Diandra struggled with each decision. The class reading would have illustrated something valuable. She had recently moved for this job, and she missed her family back home. The collaborative project depended on connections that had taken time to forge, and she wondered if those relationships would hold up.

It helped for Diandra to identify what each no would allow her to say yes to: yes to writing, yes to getting settled in her new town, yes to a strong start on other projects before adding a new collaboration. Although she grappled with how to set priorities for competing demands, she was motivated to change, since her job and her physical and emotional health depended on it.

There are trade-offs. A management professor told me I had to be the most expensive coach on earth, because after we talked about the need to let some projects go, she turned down a lucrative consulting gig to create time to write. Someone else confided that she had skipped a meeting and, as a result, missed her surprise baby shower. However, my clients wanted the long-term career benefit of time for their research more than they wanted the things they gave up. Setting the boundaries needed to achieve one's career goals while maintaining life balance requires awareness, skills, and practice.

Time-use studies have revealed that the difficulty Diandra faced in preserving her research time is common among female academics. Compared with their male counterparts, women spend more time on teaching, mentoring, and service. Although men and women do similar amounts of professional service, which often carries visibility and prestige, women spend more hours doing service to the university, and

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are more likely to serve in time-intensive lower-status positions such as director of undergraduate studies.

Women are less conditioned to ask for what they need, and when they do speak up, they are more likely to face social sanctions. Students expect female faculty members to be more nurturing. Women of color and those from other underrepresented groups must also contend with biases related to race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

The good news is that female academics can take steps that will help them to succeed. Here are eight crucial steps to leading a balanced life:

- Keep your eyes on the prize. A strong research profile puts you in position to support students and gives you a greater say in the future of your department, college, and profession. Saying no to small requests allows you to say yes to things that matter.
- Be aware of gender role conflicts. One female professor, despite being under tremendous pressure to publish, was planning to take time off when her in-laws came to visit. When she summoned her courage and asked if they could babysit while she worked, they immediately agreed and were delighted to have nice alone with their grandchildren. Take time for things that fill your heart, but avoid burdening yourself out of a gender-based sense of duty.
- Negotiate at home as well as at work. Academic women value their own and their partners’ careers equally, but male academics value their own careers ahead of those of their wives.

Working mothers in general put in about five hours more a week on paid and unpaid work than working fathers do. In addition to tasks such as picking up the kids, women must make sure their spouses also handle their share of such responsibilities as coordinating the car pool.

- Use tools like rubrics to keep grading manageable. This is both a time-preserving and pedagogically sound practice, because feedback is most useful when it is timely.
- Ask many of your colleagues to provide feedback on your work. When asked a question, tell her student who could be doing more to provide their joint research forward, she noticed this comment was real, that the advice of a demanding colleague was completing their grades with more publications on their CVs. After realizing the benefit to her students, she asked them to do more.
- Take time to recharge. In this case, it was an area who couldn’t concentrate at the end of a proposal what she had read to the start. She asked me if there were brainstorms she could practice to strengthen her memory. After a long-planned two-week vacation, not only was she more relaxed, but she told me, “I’m no longer having trouble retaining what I’ve read.” It wasn’t brainstorms that she needed, but rest and recovery.
- Don’t go it alone. A professor who spent months gathering additional data in response to a reviewer’s comments later realized that a simpler response would have sufficed. When faced with a difficult dilemma, ask a trusted colleague for input. The most successful academics are in support networks.

Female professors face a set of challenges that can be difficult to navigate, but are not insurmountable. Most of the women in a college experience their work as not simply a job or a career, but a calling. If you’ve lost the sense of joy you once found in your work, you can take heart that others have found ways to reconnect with the things they value most. The strategies of these successful academic women can serve as a road map to create the meaningful and balanced work and personal life you desire for.

Rena Solomon is president of Leander College, a national coaching and training business in Ann Arbor, Mich. This essay is adapted from her new book, The Coach’s Guide for Women Professors Who Want a Successful Career and a Well-Balanced Life (Sydai).

SIX YEARS AND COUNTING

RECOGNIZED AS A GREAT COLLEGE TO WORK FOR

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Why They Want to Reject You

It's nothing personal, just that search-committee members have too much to do and too few hands to do it by KAREN KELSKY

You've written your dissertation, scheduled your defense, and now you're heading out on the market. You've been proactive and smart, you've researched the market, and you have a solid record of teaching and even a peer-reviewed publication. You will surely rise to the top, right? Wrong. Why? Because, in a nutshell, the search-committee members want to reject you. They don't love you. They aren't excited to see your application come in. On the contrary, they dread dealing with it. But it's not personal. It's not you they dread, it's the search itself. The whole exercise of sifting through applications, evaluating, discussing, interviewing, inviting, and offering in this demoralized and downsized industry.

Let me explain. One of the consequences of the evaporation of tenure lines and tenure-track faculty numbers is an intensified service burden on those full-time professors who remain. Their teaching load may or may not have increased — that depends on the reliance of their department on adjunct substitutes. But the adjunct population notwithstanding, there are things that only full-time, tenure-track faculty members can do, and most forms of administrative service are among them. There are fewer faculty members to handle more administrative tasks; they are teaching under less desirable conditions and seeing their incomes fall further behind the cost of living — and they are not a happy lot.

When and under what conditions do those overburdened faculty members actually read your files? Are they sipping cocktails on a breezy veranda, poring excitedly over the brilliance on every page? Actually, no. Here is the average day of the faculty member who is reading your file:

She wakes up at 7 a.m. to get two kids up and fed, teeth brushed, and out the door to school. Runs to the office and preps for her 7:00-student intro class. Teaches class. Cooses back to 7:30 emails from large intro class complaining about grading of recent midterm. Meets with teaching assistants who handled the grading and are now at the center of an undergraduate mutiny. Handles crying TA. Rushes out to lunch meeting. Rushes back for office hours. Meets with 15 unhappy students, some of whom threaten to speak to the dean about her course. Does paperwork for recertification of large intro course for gen-ed requirements in the college. Realizes data are needed but office administrator, now shared with two other departments, is unavailable to provide data. Walks to an office across the campus to find someone who can provide data. Examines impeccable enrollment figures. Comes back late for faculty meeting, where department head explains further 18-percent budget cut to be absorbed in the coming semester, reductions in TA lines, and increasing enrollments in all courses. Leaves faculty meeting early under the judgmental gazes of childless colleagues, rushes to pick up kids from after-school care. Misses kids home for piano lessons and soccer. Throws dinner on the table at 6:30. Cleans up kitchen. Argues with partner over unwashed dishes from breakfast. Helps kids with homework. Rushes them and puts them to bed. Folds clean laundry left over from night before. At 9:30 sits down to computer to log in ... and proceeds to discover 342 unread e-mails for the sabbatical, faculty job opening. Lectures for next day’s class still not finished.

Is this search committee member excited to read those files? Eager? Enthusiastic? No, my friend. She is exhausted. Dazed I say exhausted. What she wants, more than anything else at that moment, is to be able to reject 32 of those applications so that she can get to the long shortlist for the next day’s meeting, shut down the computer, and go to bed. How much time is she going to give to each application in this initial rejection-round review? A minute or two, five if she’s lucky. The letter gets skimped, the CV glanced at. And with 95 percent of the files are dispatched to the reject folder, so that she does not have to look at them, think about them, or worry about them for one more second.

Overwork, exhaustion, irritability, second shift, increasing service, ballooning numbers of applications — this all comes together into that moment when your file is opened and gets its first look. It’s not pretty. They don’t love you. What they want, with all their hearts, is to reject you. So, what do you do?

You deliver an undeniable record in a small number of flawless pages. You give them exactly the information they need, and not one word more. A two-page job letter, a one-page teaching statement, a two-sentence research statement, and let’s say just as an example, not a pre-scription — a five-page CV. On those 10 slender pages rest your hopes for permanent, secure employment, health-insurance benefits for you and your family, and the opportunity to work in your chosen profession. No other 10 pages that you write will ever carry a greater weight or will be worth more money.

And yet, candidate after candidate throws these documents together in a day or two, believing that somehow — by magic, perhaps — all the years of work will automatically translate into the outcomes they desire, with no sustained critical effort on their part to translate it into language the search committee will respect and respond to.

Needless to say, that belief is incorrect. A set of job documents requires hours and hours of painstaking, exhausting, excruciating work. Some dismiss this attention to the writing as an obsessive-compulsive preoccupation with meaningless detail. It isn’t. The spaces of translation between the record and the outcome is a space of tremendous creativity and meaning — it is a kind of self-making — and deserves deep care and attention. You may never get a tenure-track job, despite your efforts. But go into the search (and leave it) knowing you did everything possible to succeed.

Karen Kabbey is a former tenured professor and department head with 15 years of experience in major research institutions. She runs The Professor Is In, a business and blog dedicated to helping PhDs navigate the academic job search. This essay was adapted from her book, The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. Into a Job (© 2013), published by Three Rivers Press, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.