

“NO UNIVERSITY IS AN ISLAND”
AN INTERVIEW WITH CARY NELSON
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1. Are there ways your views on these topics have evolved since "Manifesto of a Tenured Radical"?

My political work in the profession and in higher education generally began in response to my realization that nothing I could do for my graduate students personally could secure their careers in a job system designed to exploit them. I had to work on the system as well. Manifesto of a Tenured Radical (1997), however, was focused more on the damage done to individuals. No University is An Island: Saving Academic Freedom (2010) addresses structural problems. Both books, of course, were published by NYU, so they do conveniently bookend this change in focus.

I could not have predicted in the earlier book that higher education's reliance on contingent teachers would increase as much as it has. I would not have predicted that the spread between upper administrative salaries and faculty compensation would grow as much as it has. Two decades ago I was still working closely with administrators on shared goals; now I only rarely find a senior administrator with similar values. When I wrote the earlier book I also still retained great hope in disciplinary organizations as potential organs of change. No more. They are too deeply embedded in a culture of covering for member departments and of honoring status and privilege. The AAUP experience has also led me away from thinking about academia largely in terms of English to thinking nationally and internationally about higher education in general, and the two books embody that difference. Despite the difficulty in making the AAUP a still more activist organization, the fact is that every week the AAUP does progressive work for the profession and the country.

2. Many of the issues you discuss -- centralization of decision making, emphasis on non-academic values, increasing reliance on adjuncts -- aren't in fact brand new, but as you write have been growing over time. Why have so many faculty members -- even if they share your views -- not been more vocal about these trends?

I address this more-than-vexing question repeatedly in No University is an Island. There are several reasons. Two generations of faculty members have been socialized to concentrate on their careers and ignore their community responsibilities. Those who feel differently often feel their colleagues are indifferent and the cause hopeless. In the absence of effective local organizations, activism can seem futile, whereas individual teaching and research are often immensely gratifying. So people concentrate on what works. But a slew of familiar human capacities for hiding from reality play a role as well, from rationalization and denial to simple avoidance and fear.

Yet higher education's perfect storm seems steadily more perfect. The trends you list have grown markedly worse in just the last two years. Repression will eventually produce resistance. Then faculty members, graduate students, and academic professionals alike will discover the pleasures and rewards of solidarity and group action. They do not replace individual work, but they can complement it and make you whole. In November I spent a morning marching in a cold rain chanting in harmony with striking graduate students on my campus. Then I went home to write. My day felt complete.

3. Many adjuncts might take offense at your suggestion that more emphasis is needed on creating tenure-track jobs as opposed to preserving the current number of adjunct jobs. Many of them say that they have a shot at better working conditions and pay as adjunct, but little to no shot at tenure, so they should focus on current realities. How would you answer them?

The AAUP was founded on the principle that there is no academic freedom without job security. In that I am a devout believer. Renewable term contracts can offer some protection, but the moment of individual contract renewal is still a moment of extreme vulnerability. If you do not believe that, you should meet contingent faculty with distinguished teaching and publication records who were “non-renewed,” without due process, after twenty or more years of service; talk to faculty members, as I have, who found themselves resorting to manual labor at age 60. A contract system cannot begin to work well for individuals without very strong language about academic freedom, shared governance, due process, and peer review, and without a strong union. Tenure itself is vulnerable in wartime and other periods of national madness, but it remains the best system we have to guarantee the independence and integrity of the faculty.

The solution I urge in the book is to grant tenure to long-term adjuncts, even if it is only tenure at the relevant percentage of the appointment. Meanwhile, higher education is creating two very different faculty cultures--the tenured and the contingent--and the widening divide between them does not bode well for the faculty role in shaping institutional mission. Splitting the faculty into two ideological groups with divergent attitudes about teaching and research is a recipe for faculty powerlessness overall.

I do argue that the jobs of individual adjunct faculty should be protected, that no adjunct faculty member should be let go in order to create a tenure-track position, but an effort to retain the absolute number of contingent slots—to fill voluntary vacancies with adjunct faculty rather than combining open positions to create full-time tenured jobs—is a sure route to degrading the academy. We must work to reduce resentment rather than institutionalize it in a permanent two-class system.

Politically active adjunct faculty members recognize that there is potential power in numbers, but in truth adjunct faculty have been hard to organize, making it difficult actually to wield that power. In any case, the larger question is what is best for higher education as a whole. The answer is unambiguous: the faculty should be a house unified, not divided.

4. You note that strikes failed to restore the union for grad students at NYU (most recently), or to win recognition for the grad employee union at Yale, and that NLRB support comes and goes depending on who is in the White House. What should graduate students do to improve the way they are treated?

As I argue repeatedly in No University is an Island, there is no fundamental solution to injustices grounded in abuses of hierarchy except collective action, carried out in combination with individual efforts at consciousness-raising. Incredibly enough, I still encounter faculty members asserting that graduate students are simply “apprentices” and therefore do not merit or need representation. And these are not faculty members otherwise preoccupied with hatching dinosaur eggs; they are active members of the contemporary profession. One of my colleagues not long ago asserted that it was a matter of principle that graduate student assistants could be denied health care coverage if they were employed during the summer. What the “principle” was I cannot guess. The grad employee union filed a grievance. That is the route to justice

Even in right-to-work states, grad employees who can reach majority membership in an advocacy group can compel unofficial but effective negotiation. I tell one such story in the book. Faculty members can do the same, as they do, for example, at Fairfield University in Connecticut. Meanwhile, everyone enlightened enough to do so should educate recalcitrant colleagues at every level. My best graduate students are not my professional equals, but they are certainly my intellectual equals. I learn more from them collectively than they can learn from me. We are colleagues. I supervise them, but my primary job there is to draw out of them the best possible work that they themselves can do. So let's call it "supervisory collegiality." All this makes their exploitation intolerable.

I am in regular contact with my graduate advisees of twenty and thirty years ago. These are lifelong relationships. Thus I take our treatment of current students very personally. Yet the institutional reasons for promoting graduate student careers are still stronger. Humanities faculty members especially often do not understand that a department's national reputation depends not only on what its faculty members accomplish but also on the lifetime achievements of its graduates. And yet the brutal misallocation of my university's resources is putting our most recent (and unemployed) PhDs at risk of being run out of the profession. The only way they can build careers is to be employed as postdocs, sometimes for as long as five years. We've been doing that with great results—with people eventually winning tenure-track jobs, publishing widely, and becoming nationally respected in the discipline—but now the funding is in jeopardy. It is in jeopardy because too many administrators do not understand what a research university is.

5. How has the economic mess of the last year affected the issues you care about in academe?

The recession—which may last several years in academe—has simultaneously made everything worse and opened opportunities for collective action and resistance. The inspiring public demonstrations and organizing efforts in California, multiplying in both the California State University and University of California systems, are the most striking examples of new activism. Of course the Cal State faculty are organized for collective bargaining, whereas UC faculty remain mostly atomized, but they are strengthening or reviving AAUP chapters and speaking out with increasing effectiveness. And the AFT's lecturers' union in the UC system is pursuing grievance cases, including the brutal dismissal of lecturers who have taught full-time for two decades or more. The old adage that

administrators are only there to order pencils and keep the air conditioning running hardly survives the experience of being fired or having a furlough imposed on you unilaterally.

The recession has also made the widening gap between administrative and community values –between the forces of corporatization and the components of a higher education ethic—increasingly visible. Meanwhile, the recession has made the plight of grad employees and contingent faculty much worse. Careers will be destroyed. People will be compelled to abandon their professional identities. And the sum of human knowledge will be diminished.

As I was completing No University is an Island in the summer of 2009, I also realized that the economic crisis, whether real or manufactured on a given campus, might help give the book an audience. Faculty members are no more eager to hear bad news than anyone else is, and much of the news in higher education is very bad indeed. But peoples’ confidence that they can keep their heads down and avoid the consequences of administration by fiat is, to say the least, being challenged. So I felt this crisis provided an opportunity to reach more people. If the book was to have its moment, the recession was it.

I also felt it important to publish the book while I still definitely had the modest AAUP pulpit at hand. NYU felt the same way. Certainly if the book were to recommend changes in AAUP practice, I should be on board to promote them and debate them. If I am reelected, I’ll have two more years to continue that dialogue. And if our members don’t like my ideas, they’ll have an alternative. Meanwhile No University is an Island will demonstrate that it is possible to sustain your sense of humor in dark times.

6. How do you see the AAUP tackling the problems you note in your book?

The first thing the AAUP does is to provide faculty members, academic professionals, and graduate students with the tools they need to create good policies on their own campuses. We cannot do the necessary local campus work from Washington. Not on 3,500 college and university campuses. We cannot even do all of that work from our statewide AAUP organizations, though our state “conferences,” as we call them, do sometimes send faculty teams to campuses in need. And of course the national organization sends investigative teams to address a limited number of serious violations of academic freedom each year.

So the AAUP's role is partly educational, but it is also far more than that. It writes policy and articulates principle about faculty and student rights and responsibilities that can be formally adopted and embodied in statutes, handbooks, and contracts. It calls attention to good and bad practices. To be effective in all these roles, however, the organization needs to communicate more effectively. That's been a priority for the leadership and for key staff for several years, and we've made great progress, but further work remains. The AAUP also needs to be more open and forthcoming about its internal policies and modes of operation.

The table of contents of No University is an Island is indicative of how broad the AAUP's reach is, given that the AAUP is involved in all these issues:

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS ACADEMIC FREEDOM?

1: THE THREE-LEGGED STOOL: ACADEMIC FREEDOM, SHARED GOVERNANCE, AND TENURE

2: HOW A CAMPUS LOSES ITS WAY: SIXTEEN THREATS TO ACADEMIC FREEDOM

3: LEGACIES OF MISRULE: OUR CONTINGENT FUTURE

4: BAREFOOT IN NEW ZEALAND: POLITICAL CORRECTNESS ON CAMPUS

5: THE FUTURE OF FACULTY UNIONIZATION

6: GRADUATE-EMPLOYEE UNIONIZATION AND THE FUTURE OF ACADEMIC LABOR

7: ON WEAKENED GROUND: THE AAUP, PEDAGOGY, AND THE STRUGGLE OVER ACADEMIC FREEDOM

8: NO CAMPUS IS AN ISLAND: REFLECTIONS ON THE AAUP PRESIDENCY

9: EVOLUTION OR DEVOLUTION: THE FUTURE OF THE AAUP'S COMMITTEE A ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND TENURE

Meanwhile, I believe higher education is at a tipping point, that academic freedom is in danger, that shared governance has been badly eroded during the recession, that we are close to replacing the goal of

helping to equip students for citizenship with the narrow aim of job training. There is very little time left. The AAUP is on the front lines of efforts to preserve and improve what we have. That is why I wrote the book and why I am publishing it now.

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