

R&D MAGAZINE (June 18, 2010)

HIGHER EDUCATION UNDER SEIGE

SCHOLAR ARGUES IN NEW BOOK

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — Colleges and universities are under siege from an array of economic, political and cultural forces that are dramatically changing higher education as we know it – but not for the better, according to Cary Nelson, a professor emeritus of [English](#) at the University of Illinois.

In a new book, “No University is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom” (New York University Press, 2010), Nelson examines a lengthy list of trends and forces – such as corporatization, globalization, and intrusive research oversight – that he says are eroding the three foundational principles of higher education: academic freedom, shared governance and tenure.

Faculty members are being disenfranchised by the societal culture of neoliberalism and political and religious intolerance, legal threats, and abuses of national security measures that attempt to monitor and subvert free speech inside and outside the classroom.

Collectively, these trends and forces are shifting the curricula at America’s colleges and universities, dictating scholars’ research agendas and fomenting a culture of fear across the nation’s campuses.

Nelson is the president of the American Association of University Professors, the nation’s largest nonprofit multidisciplinary professional organization for faculty.

The AAUP investigates alleged abuses of academic freedom and faculty rights at college campuses around the country each year.

Nelson cites a number of examples where free speech and academic freedom have been under assault by administrators, politicians and the

public.

However, in Nelson's view the greatest threat to academic freedom is the trend of replacing tenured faculty positions at America's 4,000 colleges and universities with part-time contingent instructors. Of the nearly 1.4 million faculty members currently teaching, most – about 1 million – are part-time, contingent employees who work without the protection of tenure and the academic freedom and job security it ensures.

“If nothing happens to change the culture, at some point all faculty positions will be contingent,” Nelson said. “Tenure will just disappear or just become such a tiny element of many campuses that it will be irrelevant. I'm a dyed-in-the-wool, devout believer that you only have academic freedom and free speech if you have job security. If you don't have job security, you can't speak out forcefully, and I think that means academic freedom will be diminished.”

Fearing reprisal and potential job loss, contingent faculty avoid designing courses that may spark controversy and are reluctant to speak out about issues that may put them at odds with university officials.

And while much news media coverage has been devoted to financial crises at America's colleges and universities because of declining public funding and the recession, Nelson believes that some of the claims of economic hardship may be exaggerated by university administrators to justify employee furloughs, salary cuts and the elimination of programs – and to achieve these and other management objectives without faculty consultation.

Accordingly, institutional support is being directed disproportionately to academic programs and research initiatives that attract grants and maximize tuition revenue – at the expense of disciplines such as the humanities and the interpretive social sciences.

Likewise, public demand for instrumentalization is skewing the curricula toward job training and rendering the concept of a liberal education – one that prepares students for citizenship in a democracy – an anachronism, or a luxury that only wealthy students at elite universities can afford.

As one example of how universities are going astray, Nelson points to the

U. of I.'s Global Campus initiative, the online degree program conceived as a new revenue stream to replace dwindling public funding and tap into the adult learner market that online colleges such as the University of Phoenix have mined successfully. The initiative failed to gain faculty members' support early on and flourish as it originally was envisioned because, Nelson says, administrators attempted to circumnavigate shared governance procedures and curtail faculty involvement, rather than drawing upon faculty members' expertise and experience in crucial areas such as course design and online education.

Despite repeated attempts by corporate-model administrators and political conservatives to undermine academic freedom, Nelson believes that faculty members bear the ultimate responsibility for safeguarding it by actively participating in shared governance on their campuses. However, many faculty members, especially younger people who are intently focused on their career trajectories, are disengaged from the machinations of university politics, may not want to take time to participate in shared governance processes, and don't really comprehend what academic freedom is – and how encroachment upon it affects them, Nelson said.

"I often say that if you put most faculty members up against the wall and say, 'If you can't defend academic freedom, we're going to shoot you,' we'd have a lot of dead faculty members. I just don't think a lot of the professoriate is prepared to be articulate about what academic freedom is," Nelson said.

"Without fundamental changes in faculty attitudes and ambitions, the kind of higher education we know will not long survive, except to some degree at the wealthiest institutions," Nelson wrote.

Nelson, who recently was elected to a third term as president of the AAUP, advocates unionization as a means of empowering faculty and ensuring that academic freedom and shared governance continue to thrive on the nation's campuses.

--BASED ON A NEWS RELEASE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS