

The End of Education: Globalization and Academic Freedom

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Several national and international forces--uncoordinated but with powerful and interrelated effects--are intersecting, with serious implications for academic freedom in the humanities and the interpretive social sciences. The dramatically increased reliance on contingent labor in the American academy is paralleled by comparable changes abroad, though in the developing world pressure from the International Monetary Fund to increase the use of part-time faculty presents a unique challenge. Lack of job security decreases faculty willingness to speak freely. Then of course contingent faculty have substantially less power and influence in shared governance. Meanwhile, the humanities and interpretive social sciences as a whole have less influence in institutions that prioritize disciplines that produce revenue.

Religious or political bias and intolerance inhibits academic freedom in many countries; in the United States the former is largely restricted to K-12 and to religious institutions, but political pressures on classroom speech in higher education are increasing.

We face the special risk of reduced tolerance for oppositional professorial political speech should further terrorist attacks take place on American soil. Meanwhile, the ground work for public anger is being laid by David Horowitz and others in the renewed culture wars. More broadly, we face worldwide defunding through a global emphasis on job training and the instrumentalization of the educational mission. I will offer a general assessment of these trends and suggestions for how we can resist them.

In the short term, efforts must be made to strengthen faculty senates and AAUP chapters. Faculty collective bargaining needs to focus more consistently on building academic freedom and shared governance provisions in its contracts. But long term we need to promote more community oriented faculty identities. We have not been helped by the focus on careerism and disciplinarity that has dominated higher education for two generations. One of the few countervailing forces has been the graduate employee unionization movement, which has helped build subject positions that combine academic work with community commitment. Whether older faculty can also be hailed by these values is uncertain. But we must begin to try.