Not Just a Job …

From "The Deteriorating Guru: The Crisis in the Professoriate," an article by Philip G. Altbach, director of the Boston College Center for International Higher Education, in the Summer 2004 issue of the center's quarterly, International Higher Education.

Universities worldwide are becoming marketized, privatized, differentiated and otherwise changed to meet the demands of an academic environment that stresses accountability and mass access. Higher education is increasingly seen as a "private good"—a commodity that should be subject to the logic of the market. These changes have had a profoundly negative impact on the academic profession—the heart of any academic enterprise. Working conditions and career paths for the academic profession are deteriorating. Universities often cannot attract the "best and brightest" and may even have problems luring the "reasonably intelligent and above average."

The real crisis will be how to maintain an academic environment that will attract able scholars and scientists to the universities and at the same time recognize the challenges of mass higher education and the financial realities of the 21st century. At present, academic systems are, without thinking, damaging the core of the university by ignoring the needs of the professoriate. Those responsible for decision-making (e.g., senior administrators, boards of trustees and government officials) are ignoring the academic profession as they grapple with increasingly difficult problems facing higher education. It should be recognized that without a strong, committed academic profession, higher education cannot provide effective teaching or top-quality research. In knowledge-based economies, universities must have academic staff who are well-qualified, well-trained and committed to academic work.

Not long ago, in the more successful academic systems, academics could plan on a career that was reasonably secure and offered the satisfactions of teaching and some research. Many saw university teaching as a "calling" and were attracted to the life of the mind. In the United States, most were appointed to tenure-track positions that led to secure jobs once the rigorous review process for promotion to tenure was completed. In much of Europe, academics had appointments to the civil service and the job security and status that came along with that. Salaries were not high and did not match the incomes of other professionals with similar qualifications, but they permitted a middle-class lifestyle. There was little serious evaluation of academic performance, but a general conviction existed that almost all academics were doing a decent job. Academics enjoyed a high degree of autonomy as well as fairly secure academic freedom. The few research "stars" were rewarded mainly with high status rather than large salaries, and most were teachers who did little research. Even in many developing countries—such as India, China, Nigeria and others—academe was an honorable profession that, even if ill-paid, provided high social status and a secure position.

Some would argue that it is high time for professors to be forced to compete and be subjected to the same pressures as in other occupations. Accountability and evaluation will, it is argued, get rid of unproductive "deadwood." It is not so simple as that. The traditional culture of academe worked reasonably well, even in the context of mass higher education. Academics had a degree of autonomy, and the academic community decided on such matters as curriculum, the organization of studies and the like. In a few places, such as Italy, the structural problems of the academic system and the conservatism of the professoriate created problems. But generally, the academic system provided acceptable quality of teaching and produced research. The conditions of academic work, even without high salaries, were generally acceptable. The academic profession attracted bright scholars who appreciated the special circumstances of university life. The combination of intellectual freedom, autonomy and a relative lack of day-to-day accountability created an environment in which creative work could be accomplished.

Much has changed almost everywhere in the past several decades. Universities have responded to societal pressures by changing the nature of academic work dramatically. Academic salaries have not kept up either with inflation or with remuneration in other professional fields. In many countries, there is no longer the expectation of a secure career. In the United States, fewer than half of new academic appointments are tenure-track and full-time. …
A decline in the number of full-time jobs means greater competition, and this has led to some unemployment of new Ph.D. graduates. Many of the most able Ph.Ds are taking jobs in other fields, including government and business, where salaries are better and there is better chance for a secure future.
A growing divide exists between the minority of tenured faculty and the rest, creating a kind of two-tier academic profession.

In other countries, the situation is similarly grim.

The traditional employment security of the academic profession is being weakened by moving academics from the civil service. In Britain, tenure was abolished as part of a major university reform aimed at making the entire academic system more competitive. In Germany, most new academic appointments do not permit promotion, forcing many academics to compete for new positions at other universities. In Central Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union, the traditional academic profession has been greatly weakened by changes in working conditions, deteriorating salaries and loss of status. It is common in developing countries for academic salaries to be so poor that even full-time professors must hold more than one job. In Latin America, traditional reliance on part-time teachers has prevented the emergence of an effective professoriate.

Everywhere, increased accountability has subjected academics to bureaucratic controls and has weakened academic autonomy. As universities have become more oriented to student interests and market demands, traditional academic values have been undermined. The rise of the private sector in higher education—the fastest-growing segment worldwide—has meant further deterioration of the profession because private institutions seldom provide full-time positions nor do they provide much security of tenure. A profession that thrived on autonomy and a certain detachment from direct competition is now exposed to the vicissitudes of the market.

The future of the academic profession is uncertain, which is a problem for the success of the academic enterprise generally. What will attract bright young people to study for the doctorate when the careers—and salaries—available are marginal at best? Will academic work continue to be organized in a way that supports and rewards basic research? How will the traditional links between teaching and research be maintained so that those responsible mainly for teaching will keep abreast of current developments in their fields? Universities depend on a full-time professoriate—not only to teach but also to participate in governance and curriculum development. New patterns of managerial control vitiate traditional patterns of collegial governance and further weaken both the morale and the commitment of the academic profession. Academic morale is deteriorating in many countries, and many have noted declines in both the abilities and the numbers of those pursuing doctoral study with the aim of joining the professoriate. …

Without a doubt, there must be adjustments in academic work and in the organization of universities to meet the needs of mass higher education and knowledge economies. Further differentiation in professorial roles, more extensive measurement of academic performance and greater flexibility in appointments are probably necessary. If the academic profession continues to decline, higher education may continue to produce graduates, but the intellectual quality of those graduates and their ability to participate in society will be in question. Just as important, the basic research that universities have produced will be less innovative and valuable. The future of the university lies in the hands of the professoriate.

Targets of Opportunity

From a news release circulated in late summer by the Washington, D.C.-based National Retail Federation (NRF) announcing the findings of the trade association's second annual back-to-college survey.

The second annual *NRF 2004 Back-to-College Consumer Intentions and Actions Survey*, conducted by BIGresearch for NRF, found that the average college student will spend $605.69 of their own money on back-to-college merchandise this year. Before returning to campus, college students and their parents will pump $25.7 billion into the economy, nearly twice as much as what will be spent on elementary through high school students ($14.8 billion).

"By recognizing a historically neglected market, retailers have found themselves in the middle of a gold mine," said NRF President and CEO Tracy Mullin. "When retailers can satisfy the needs of new—and potentially lifelong—consumers by offering fun, in-demand, exciting merchandise, everybody wins."

Freshmen and juniors may be the most lucrative targets for retailers this year. The average freshman, who will likely be moving away from home for the first time, plans to spend $1205.97, primarily on electronics ($759.97). Juniors, who may be moving off campus for the first time, plan to spend $811.83 on average, with nearly one-third of their spending ($278.47) devoted to dorm and apartment furnishings. Sophomores' and seniors' spending will be significantly less ($444.66 and $425.23 on average, respectively). Students in graduate or medical school plan to spend $397.44 on average, the least of any group.

In all, parents and students will spend $7.5 billion on electronics, $8.8 billion on textbooks, $3.2 billion on clothing and accessories, $2.6 billion on dorm or apartment furnishings, $2.1 billion on school supplies, and $1.5 billion on shoes. …