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Regional

Faculty need to reclaim narrative on higher education

There is a great deal of misinformation about higher education, particularly when it comes to what faculty members do, how they do it, and why it matters. Among the many “urban legends” that have become popular in many quarters – including in political circles – is that because education in general, and higher education in particular, are part of the service sector, the increase in the cost of that service must be blamed on labor. In other words, the fault lies with expensive faculty.

This is not a thought that can be placed in any particular ideology or political party. On Jan. 13, 2012, during a visit to Central Bucks High School West in Pennsylvania, Vice President Joe Biden declared, “Salaries for college professors have escalated significantly. They should be good, but they have escalated significantly.”

Needless to say, both conservative pundits and many among the media and the general public took that statement as a matter of fact. It has become part of the conventional wisdom that professors make huge salaries. Further, it is becoming a tool to justify a reduction in the number of faculty members, particularly tenure-track, while increasing on-line courses in the belief that they will make higher education cheaper without reducing quality.

The problem is that such an assertion about faculty salaries is not founded. Based upon data from a variety of sources, including the annual faculty compensation survey carried out by the American

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Association of University Professors, real year-over-year faculty salaries, adjusted for inflation, have declined 0.12 percent since the 2008 recession.

The AAUP’s report pretty much places the blame for the increase in the cost of tuition on a number of other factors that we have long known about: declining state appropriations for public institutions, erosion of endowments and the cost of covering unfunded federal and state mandates.

Further, the above-mentioned report, using data from the U.S. Department of Labor, concluded that relative to professionals in comparable occupations, even the highest-ranking tenured professors are generally underpaid.

For those of us who have been involved in administration and management of higher education these conclusions are not surprising. What I found refreshing from the report is the statement that faculty members, “need to reclaim the public narrative about higher education.”

The call from the AAUP for faculty to become better informed and more proactive in disseminating critical information about their profession is a welcome one. Due to the sense of insularity in which faculty members at institutions of

higher education live, they tend to believe that everybody understands what they do and why it matters. As a person who has dealt with students, parents, legislators and the general public on these issues, I can attest that nothing can be further from the truth.

Data regarding the decrease of salaries for faculty members is just an example that needs to be publicized, but it’s just the start. To begin with, most people only see faculty work as contact time with students, whether in the classroom, lab, field or studio. Most people have no idea the preparation time and effort required for those classes. Most people do not understand the need for faculty members to take sabbaticals in order to advance their scholarly work, or the need for them to attend professional conferences so they are up to date with the advances in their fields so they can offer their students the most current information in the subjects they teach.

People do not understand either the amount of work faculty have to do as part of the service to their institutions and the importance that work has to the very concept of shared governance. Another aspect most people do not understand is that research money generated by faculty members through external grants is money that comes back to the institution to pay for expenditures that otherwise would go uncovered.

Tenure is another issue that is fraught with mis-

understanding. Tenure is essential to attract good talent, not so much because of the guarantees it provides in terms of freedom of scholarly work, but because faculty are underpaid it provides at least some sort of job security.

And I could go on and on.

Since the creation of universities in Europe before the Renaissance, faculty have taken for granted that everybody outside their campuses know and understand the value of higher education. After all, it is a noble profession. But this belief is not true. And the current financial realities of higher education, particularly in the U.S., have shown how that ignorance can be used to further undermine postsecondary institutions.

Most faculty members can’t see that concepts such as tenure, sabbatical, support for research or even attending conferences, are being questioned on a regular basis and used as examples of an activity that has run amuck and is undeserving of public support.

As long as faculty members do not get into the shoes of the common citizen and the suspicious politicians, we will be moving towards a slow but unavoidable irrelevancy.

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