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### The Bad Old Days

How higher education fared during the Great Depression

By *Ellen Schrecker*

When the dean canceled our search for a new assistant professor and told us to cut back travel, limit photocopying, and stop serving food at functions, we knew the times were bad. Admittedly, my institution, Yeshiva University, may be in a more precarious position than most colleges since Bernard L. Madoff —*the* Bernard L. Madoff —was, until his arrest for a \$50-billion Ponzi scheme, treasurer of our Board of Trustees. Still, as stories of hiring freezes and dismissals accumulate, it is clear that not only Yeshiva, but much of academe, has been hurt by the economic meltdown.

Perhaps the Obama administration's stimulus package will ultimately pull the economy back from the brink; but if it doesn't, the nation and its colleges and universities will be in for considerable belt-tightening. Although it is hard to predict exactly how academe should respond to the most serious economic crisis since the 1930s, it may be possible to assess some possible options if we look at how higher education fared in that earlier crisis. After all, despite its enormous growth since World War II, academe's institutional structures and educational mission remain more or less the same.

So I've been reading *Depression, Recovery, and Higher Education*, a report published in 1937 by a special committee of the American Association of University Professors. I was not surprised to find some parallels to the current situation, especially in the diminished revenues, the widespread retrenchments, and the demands for political and structural changes that the hard times brought to the nation's campuses.

Yet, despite those parallels, there are some very real differences —both in the nature of the crisis and in academe's response to it. Higher education serves a much broader spectrum of the American population than it did in the 1930s and is far more central to the nation's economic and social well-being than in that earlier period. At the same time, it is also much more beleaguered, under assault for such disparate things as high tuition and cultural relativism. It is possible that, in addition to major cutbacks in personnel and activities, a toxic combination of public animosity

and financial exigency may force academe to accede to demands for so-called reforms that could seriously undermine the already tenuous quality and autonomy of American higher education.

Much, of course, depends on the length and severity of the current slump. The 1929 stock-market crash did not at first seriously affect academe. As at present, endowments plummeted and the private fortunes that had bankrolled so many colleges evaporated. But American higher education had been expanding throughout the 1920s, and the full force of the Depression did not strike the academy until the Depression reached its nadir, during the academic year 1932-33. Today, however, financial insecurity has been plaguing America's colleges for years, and there is little flab left to cut. An extended downturn will only exacerbate that situation, exaggerating the already serious disparities within and between institutions and accelerating the decline of the academic profession's power and autonomy. After all, even before the current meltdown, contingent faculty members —part-time and nontenure-track instructors —were handling more than two-thirds of the nation's classes.

Just as during the Depression, states are cutting their higher-education budgets. In the 1930s, appropriations declined an average of about 40 percent, with the reductions steepest in the regions —like the manufacturing states of the upper Midwest —where the crisis was most severe. Whether state financing tumbles quite so precipitously or not, the overall impact of today's reductions may be more deleterious, since public institutions now account for a much larger percentage of the nation's undergraduates than in the past, even if they no longer rely quite so heavily on their states' taxpayers.

Private colleges are also suffering —as they did in the 1930s, when their endowments shrank by more than 26 percent, and gifts from alumni and wealthy benefactors, which had supplied nearly a quarter of their revenues, fell by more than 70 percent. Many private colleges, however, made up some of that shortfall by raising tuition, an option that, given the widespread concern about college costs, neither public nor private colleges can easily avail themselves of today.

Enrollments did rise during the Depression, but not by that much. Contrary to popular belief, young people did not flock to the nation's campuses to forestall unemployment. The increases that did occur seem to have been part of the broader expansion of higher education that had long predated the hard times. What did change was that students who had previously attended private institutions now opted for more-affordable public ones. They also avoided fields

of study —like architecture, engineering, education, and business administration —where jobs were hard to find, seeking instead a general liberal-arts education to give them the flexibility the uncertain economy seemed to demand. While it is unlikely that today's educational leaders will pour scarce resources back into already gutted traditional departments, the experience of the Depression should alert them to the dangers of tailoring the curriculum too closely to the vocational prospects of the moment.

Then as now, federal financing helped many colleges survive —mainly through student aid and infrastructure projects. Among the various measures that the New Deal devised to get income into the hands of the unemployed and destitute were some that assisted academe. The National Youth Administration's work-relief grants for students made it possible for them to stay in school. Other programs brought unemployed workers into research laboratories, libraries, and other facilities, and still others constructed campus buildings as part of the New Deal's larger public-works program. That federal spending was to continue —and grow —over the years. The current administration's plans for pumping additional money into higher education, while hardly as unprecedented as the Depression era's subsidies, are no less welcome. Here, at least, the country may have learned some lessons from the 1930s.

Despite the infusion of federal funds, most colleges and universities also cut back on spending during the height of the Depression. But while totaling about 13 percent of the academy's pre-Depression budgets, those retrenchments did not affect its educational efforts as seriously as they could have. Given the enormous diversity within American higher education, some institutions experienced more difficulties than others, and some groups of academics suffered more heavily than others. Still, only a few colleges had to close, and the damage, at least to the core educational functions of most institutions, was hardly overwhelming.

Significantly, however, much of the retrenchment went on behind closed doors. Administrators rarely consulted their faculties about the process. Whether today's meltdown will produce a similarly authoritarian (and demoralizing) form of decision making is unclear; but the serious erosion of faculty power over the past few decades gives little cause for optimism.

Cutbacks took place in every area. Construction fell 87.5 percent from pre-Depression levels and only resumed when the New Deal showered largess upon public colleges and universities. Surprisingly, despite some shrinkage during the worst years of the Depression, faculty employment held more or less steady. Tenure

had just begun to take hold, and most institutions that had it honored it. Instead, as seems to be the case today, the academy saved money by instituting hiring freezes and failing to replace people who died, retired, or left. While some colleges kept professors on beyond the retirement age for humanitarian reasons (there was, after all, no Social Security), others forced their elderly out. The University of Chicago, for example, made all faculty members older than 65 give up their jobs.

Younger academics suffered the most. Not only did hiring freezes intensify unemployment among those at the beginning of their careers, but also when they did find jobs, they had trouble keeping them. Many colleges did not reappoint instructors who were on one-year contracts or shunted them to half-time positions. New Ph.D.'s got the teaching assistantships that graduate students formerly held, while graduate students, whose ranks had inexplicably expanded, came to depend on the federal government's work-relief program. Moreover, because anti-Semitism remained rife within academe, Jews found it particularly hard to gain a foothold.

The situation may be even grimmer today. Because the academy has been downsizing its full-time faculty for years and since older (and more-highly paid) professors are watching their pension funds shrink and postponing their retirements, it will be even harder for younger scholars to obtain secure academic jobs. Tenure will become even more elusive. At the same time, cutbacks in library purchases are hurting academic presses, which will in turn reduce their lists, which will in turn make it harder for people to publish the monographs they need for promotion. Moreover, unless Washington increases its funds for research, scientists and other scholars will scramble even more desperately for grants, especially as corporate angels also fall on hard times.

Pay cuts may also reappear. During the 1930s, salary reductions were the academy's main cost-cutting measure. Out of 125 colleges the AAUP surveyed, 104, or 84 percent, had reduced professors' pay, sometimes more than once. The reductions ranged from about 5 percent to 40 percent or more, with the average around 15 percent. Public colleges cut faculty salaries more commonly than private ones, sometimes as public-relations gestures to show their state legislators that they were already practicing austerity and should be exempt from further budget cuts. As usual, beginning professors took the hardest hits, especially when across-the-board reductions took little cognizance of their already straitened circumstances.

Still, the picture was not all dismal. Having traded security for

income, professors had long been paid much less than other upper-middle-class professionals with similar levels of education. The situation was reversed during the Depression, when academics survived the downturn better than engineers, for example, who lost 62 percent of their income; dentists, who lost 47 percent; or lawyers, who lost 30 percent. In addition, the falling cost of living benefited the professoriate.

Working conditions did, however, decline. Workloads increased, especially at those public colleges where, by 1934, enrollments had begun to rise. While some academics noted that students seemed more serious and devoted to their studies, others complained of pressure not to flunk any tuition-paying bodies. Professorial perquisites like travel and research grants, outside speakers, and library purchases shrank or disappeared. While some colleges continued to grant sabbatical leaves (which they viewed as a way to reduce costs), others phased them out or offered them without pay. To make matters worse, outside sources of income like consulting jobs, royalty payments, and summer-school teaching dried up.

Such Depression-era hardships are commonplace within the ranks of today's contingent instructors. They may spread. Especially as the full-time faculty shrinks, it is likely that, except for people at top-tier institutions, most academics will experience larger classes, more administrative chores, and fewer opportunities for research.

Academic freedom, though somewhat compromised, also survived the Depression. The AAUP's Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure reported a noticeable rise in its workload, from 17 cases in 1929 to 69 in 1933, but most of those concerned tenure denials that reflected the Depression-bred inability of candidates to find jobs, not cases that reflected violations of free speech or interference with classroom teaching. Political activists at institutions like Columbia and Harvard Universities did, it is true, encounter repression and were fired or denied reappointment, while New York City's municipal colleges experienced a full-scale anti-Communist purge, when more than 30 people were fired or forced to resign as a consequence of a state investigation at the end of the decade. But the troubles of those people did not stem directly from the economic crisis — though their involvement in politics obviously reflected the radicalism spurred by bad times.

A more serious threat came from the various attempts of state legislators to cut costs by bringing colleges under tighter control. Those measures, which located power over budgetary and personnel decisions in political rather than educational authorities, struck directly at academe's autonomy. In 1936, for example, the director of Ohio's department of finance single-handedly rejected a

salary increase at all state universities. And in Arkansas, New York, and Texas, either the legislature or the governor had to approve separate appropriations for each individual faculty member. Given the current demands for accountability, such political micromanaging could very well recur.

So, too, could the Depression era's most serious incursion against academic freedom: the imposition of loyalty oaths. By 1936, 21 states and the District of Columbia had adopted some form of oath, two-thirds of which covered college professors as well as K-12 teachers. Some measures called for the taker to disavow subversive or un-American activities or to, in the words of Vermont's oath, "promote ethical character, good citizenship, and patriotic loyalty." Since such edicts depended on the subjective nature of what a prosecutor or politician might consider un-American, they could seriously endanger people's jobs. Most such oaths, however, were harmless affirmations of one's willingness to uphold the state and federal constitutions. Even so, they perched on the proverbial slippery slope, importing a demand for political orthodoxy into the classroom that was to reappear with a vengeance during the McCarthy years. Although the oaths did abate by the 1960s, some remain on the books; and their revival is not beyond the realm of possibility. In 2006, for example, the Ohio legislature required all state employees to abjure terrorism.

The current economic meltdown may well force the restructuring of American higher education —and not necessarily in a positive direction. It could accelerate the transformation of traditional full-time tenure-track faculty positions into contingent ones, for instance, or impel panicky administrators to cut programs or even whole departments without consulting their faculties.

That is not something that academics need to accept. During the Depression, most faculties were passive in the face of cutbacks and administrative fiat. Their years of relative penury may have acclimated them to hard times, or they may have believed that collective action did not comport with the genteel image they wanted to maintain. Such submissiveness in the current crunch risks abandoning whatever remains of the faculty's role within the nation's colleges, a role that until now has enhanced the overall quality of teaching and research. Unless the powers that be are reminded that academics are workers too, there is no guarantee that the billions of dollars the current stimulus program will direct to higher education will save any faculty jobs.

It is long past time for the academic profession to make its case for the value of higher education, even —or perhaps especially—in a period of economic stress. Too many of us have sloughed off our

broader responsibilities to the rest of society and buried ourselves in our libraries and laboratories, assuming that the significance of our scholarship and teaching was self-evident. But if the public views the nation's colleges only as sources of economic development and individual mobility, those institutions' obvious failure to produce during an extended downturn could destroy their base of support.

We must reorient the public discourse about higher education. Just as the Obama administration is trying to shuffle off the sleazier values of the hedge-fund managers, academe can also rededicate itself to the common good—to an education that not only prepares all its students for becoming citizens of a wider world, but also enhances the overall quality of their lives.

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