

BMI Teaching Trends Newsletter – July 2022

Teaching Matters

By Dr. Matthew Jackson

The Big Quit Hits Academia

Recent reports in the Chronicle of Higher Education ([*The Big Quit; Even tenure-line professors are leaving academe*](#) and [*The Season of Our Professorial Discontent*](#)) and a May 2022 [Nature](#) article explore the new normal that seems to have been initiated by the pandemic. Faculty satisfaction and student attitudes reflect a fundamental shift in academe. In the pre-COVID world, tenured faculty were relatively protected from the vagaries of job insecurity that affected other career areas. Financial pressures, particularly on [smaller colleges](#) with declining enrollment, as well as student attitudes have destabilized the institution of academic tenure prompting faculty to walk away from their previously coveted positions. An increasing number of tuition-dependent academic institutions continue to grant tenure but with the caveat of short-term contracts that allow their administration to eliminate positions based on financial need. Compensation at these institutions falls short of national averages and, along with [adjunctification](#), further chips away at the integrity faculty appointments. Politically inspired attacks on tenure at universities in red states like [Florida](#) and [Georgia](#) coupled with the expectation that professors “sell” seats to fill their courses are shoving tenure-track and tenured faculty to the exits. At some colleges, faculty members are encouraged to pack seats with warm bodies by advertising their courses with fliers around campus. There is a sense of urgency toward recruitment centered on limited tuition dollars accompanied by decisions to eliminate less productive majors. This has led to a Hunger Games mentality of “prove yourself or else” imperative. As faculty recruitment declines, smaller numbers of junior faculty who are available to take on entry-level responsibilities has resulted in tenured professors being shouldered with the burden of increasing administrative responsibilities and returning to the freshman classroom to teach introductory level courses. The loss of autonomy which is a hallmark of academic tenure has accelerated dissatisfaction accompanied by mid-career shifts and early retirements. Seasoned professors are also experiencing a significant change in the attitudes and expectations of their learners.

A psychological transformation amongst students seems to have accompanied the shift back to in-person teaching as public tolerance for pandemic mitigation measures waned. Faculty are reporting an increase in complaints and outright rudeness from students. Hostility over trivial issues such as swapping the order of textbook chapters that would be covered in class was [reported](#) by a political

science professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. As enrollment and tuition declines the pressures to keep students happy at any cost compel educators to back away from previously held standards thus “dumbing down” their curriculum. Those faculty who are employed by institutions with a tenuous hold on their financial survival may be forced to choose between maintaining academic integrity or a paycheck as students migrate away from their “tough” course to easier ones. Student unhappiness is most likely fueled by several factors including consumerism, conservative views that denigrate the institution of tenure, and mask mandates. The news and social media reports that highlight the rising cost of higher education contribute to the first couple of factors leading the current generation of college-bound undergraduates to question the return on investment for their tuition dollar. Equivocal and undemocratic decisions by university administration to remove mask mandates has contributed to the division between professor and student. We have seen reports that mask mandates ended overnight at some colleges with no input from faculty. Institutions of higher learning in states led by governors who apparently failed to complete their years of elementary learning forbid faculty from requiring masks in their classrooms. So, professors have been forced to protect themselves from their students by teaching in N95 respirators contributing to an us-versus-them mindset. Large-scale resignations by academics is not limited to the US as detailed in a recent issue of [Nature](#).

Discontent aggravated by increasing teaching demands, increasing pressure to win grants, and lip-service-level support during the pandemic have been exacerbated by pension cuts in the UK where professors express their feelings by going on [strike](#). Australian universities have lost 20% of their faculty workforce due to declining enrollment by international students who could not enter the country due to COVID restrictions. Nature’s 2021 salary and satisfaction survey offered a snapshot of the working conditions and quality of life of researchers around the world. Thirty-seven per cent of mid-career researchers were dissatisfied with their current position with 34% indicating dissatisfaction with the limited amount of time that they had for research due to teaching and administration loads. A separate [survey by The Chronicle](#) and Fidelity Investments showed that 1/3 of tenured faculty have seriously considered changing career or retiring early since the start of 2020. More than half of all faculty members who responded to the survey indicated that they were seriously weighing alternate career options or early retirement. In conclusion, university faculty are not immune from the post-pandemic Big Quit although their motivation for leaving academia is very different from other industries. Current college and university cost-reductions mean that once vacated these positions will most likely remain unfilled.