

FORUM



Student demonstration against fees and cuts, Aberdeen. Credits: <http://anticuts.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Aberdeen-student-left-banner.jpg>

---

## Anthropologists witnessing and reshaping the neoliberal academy

Edited by

**Tracey HEATHERINGTON & Filippo M. ZERILLI**

Contributions of

**Virginia R. DOMINGUEZ, Sam BECK, Carl A. MAIDA, Martin A. MILLS, Berardino PALUMBO, Alan SMART, Ger DUIJZINGS, Alexis M. JORDAN & Shaheen M. CHRISTIE, Boone W. SHEAR, Alex KOENSLER & Cristina PAPA, THE RECLAIMING OUR UNIVERSITY MOVEMENT.**

---

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons © VIRGINIA R. DOMINGUEZ

*The erosion of academic tenure in the U.S. and its ties to public neoliberal anti-intellectualism*

2017 | ANUAC. VOL. 6, N° 1, GIUGNO 2017: 29-34.

ISSN: 2239-625X – DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-2977



## The erosion of academic tenure in the U.S.

And its ties to public neoliberal anti-intellectualism

**Virginia R. DOMINGUEZ**

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

---

**ABSTRACT:** This essay examines the erosion of tenure in the U.S. academy and its connections to the spread of neoliberal capitalist ideology in U.S. colleges and universities. It also explores how this affects anthropology departments since only a small part of anthropology is ever considered part of the STEM fields.

---

I write as someone with experience at several U.S. universities but also as past president of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). And I write as someone who has held visiting positions of different kinds at universities in Israel, Hungary, England, France, Italy, South Africa, and Japan. My concerns here are primarily, but not exclusively, about what is happening to higher education in the U.S.

Change is not necessarily bad, of course. There were only four tenured women on the Yale faculty when I began there as an undergraduate, and there are many more now (though still not parity with men). And witness that Yale was for years a bastion of elite families who sent their children to exclusive private schools before they went on to Yale. It was only in the mid-sixties that starting Yale Freshmen classes consisted of more students from public high schools than private high schools. Change can be good. It can be fast or slow, but it can still be good.

The question, of course, is what kind of change we want, what kind of change we are seeing, and what kind of impact that change is having. For years I was probably too focused on my own career to notice, even when I got involved in university administration and politics, as I quickly did at Duke. I worried then about whether I would ever get tenure and whether my whole academic generation would. I envied earlier U.S. generations that had seemingly gotten professorial jobs and promotions with less scholarly

accomplishments than were apparently required of my academic generation. I thought and said that tenure should be abolished, even though I knew why it had been instituted in the first place (to avoid political appointments and firings on political, rather than intellectual, grounds). But, as years have passed and I have experienced tenured faculty positions at Duke, the University of California-Santa Cruz, the University of Iowa, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and had deep exposure to a wide variety of institutions in the U.S. through my AAA presidency, I have reevaluated tenure, worried about its erosion, noticed the rise of STEM fields in the academy (science, technology, engineering, and math) and its connections to increasing privatization, and experienced what I can only describe as growing anti-intellectualism in the public at large. In sum, I now worry deeply about higher education and perhaps especially about the research university.

### *Tenure and its erosion*

The importance of tenure at U.S. universities is that it was designed to protect scholars from interventions – and frankly witch hunts – that had nothing to do with developments in their disciplines. Tenure still depends on other members of one’s profession considering someone’s teaching and research work valuable and substantial, and it can also depend on academics outside one’s field passing judgment, as is the case with Promotion and Tenure Committees, Associate Provosts and Provosts, Chancellors and Presidents of U.S. universities. So people still make decisions and those decisions are not always by people knowledgeable enough to make those decisions, but for a number of decades institutions insisted on keeping politics out of university appointments and promotions. At times people have forgotten the value of tenure and the usefulness of tenure, and at times (such as during the McCarthy Era in the U.S. in the 1950s) people have valued it and cherished it.

But we are now undoubtedly witnessing the erosion of the tenure system at U.S. institutions of higher education. There was a time when faculty retirements and departures meant that a department would keep the line and search for a replacement. That has been less and less the case since my years at Duke in the 1980s. Increasingly, though not suddenly, faculty lines revert to central administration (sometimes to deans and sometimes to committees at that level or higher). And again increasingly, though not suddenly, allocation of those lines depends on enrollment in a department’s

courses, some formula that takes into account how much external money a department brings to the campus, or some mix of reputational or statistical rankings of a whole department, its faculty members, and even its (post)graduate students. And when a department shrinks in size, like my current department, administration responds by “allowing” the department to hire people to teach but not in tenurable positions.

I first saw this at Duke, but thought it was particular to the performing arts or the clinical medical sciences. People in those fields were given non-tenurable positions, in effect, making them “less valued” faculty members. At some point in the 1980s Duke instituted and regularized faculty lines for those faculty members, something I saw developed further in the early 1990s at the University of California-Santa Cruz. The UCSC system specified the number of courses those colleagues were required to teach (always more than the rest of us) and the duties (such as research and student advising) they were not allowed to do or, if they did them, the system would not allow them to be counted in any evaluation or possible promotion.

These were the days before the expansion of post-doctoral positions, something I have seen increasingly in Europe and the U.S. over the past two decades. Now we have more and more “postdocs” and more of them require some teaching. As I look at my own department here at UIUC, I see more people offering courses in different kinds of contingent faculty positions and the balance of those faculty members and those of us in tenured or tenure-line positions shifting. There are indeed so many non-tenurable people on our campus that central administration has had to operationalize the various existing titles, define their duties, and spread this information to departments when they have such people teaching regular courses. At the moment, for example, my own department has 6 such colleagues teaching – all women – 6 others listed in various capacities (but not really teaching), and 25 tenured or tenureable faculty. When I first came 10 years ago, the department had 30 or 31 FTEs (tenured or tenurable faculty lines) and only 1 or 2 were in non-tenurable positions.

### *Money, privatization, and its rhetoric*

There is, not surprisingly, much talk about cuts and how to handle them. For years all universities I have known well, especially the large U.S. research universities belonging to the “Big Ten,” have been delighted when colleagues have gotten grants from outside their university. Indeed there has been pressure to get those grants, and not every central administrator has fully understood how that privileges people in STEM disciplines. David Skorton,

now Secretary of the Smithsonian but 15-20 years ago first Vice President for Research and then President of the University of Iowa, did understand this despite being a Professor of Medicine before becoming a high-level administrator there. He used money from patents and big-time grants in the natural, biological, and physical sciences to help underwrite Iowa programs in the Humanities and softer Social Sciences and Area Studies programs. But I have seen little of that here at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign at least in the past 10 years.

The pressure to bring in outside money is great, the rhetoric shows up in hiring promotion, tenure, and marketing practices of this university, and the parts of the university (or even of anthropology departments) that do get those external funds are the parts that are being allowed to grow. This is especially the case now that the governor of this State (Governor Rauner) has de facto downsized state support for public Illinois universities, including UIUC, its long-standing flagship institution. We are now very close to the end of a second year without any regular state funding because the governor and his opposition in the state legislature remain locked in a seemingly endless battle over the state's allocation to higher education and service organizations. As a result, there is more talk than ever before of a financial crisis and of needed cuts, even more than when we had to take unpaid furlough days during one of my two years as AAA President. Our salaries are being paid out of university reserves, so it is no surprise that the university is constantly looking for new money to bring in. The problem is that it simultaneously then favors fields seen by the federal government, private corporations, and big-time donors as useful and valuable enough to serve the country's economy and labor needs, and it makes it harder to say no to them when they come calling – demanding things from research on topics they care about, admission of particular students to programs and schools, and a say in who the university hires and fires.

So, it is simply not true that there is no money. There appears to be less money outside the STEM fields, but huge amounts of money are sought and spent on large and potentially income-generating new hires and their specialties and projects. There is clearly a prioritization of people and projects that can bring to a U.S. college or university outside money, especially money from large sources, including (and at times especially targeting) large corporations in science, technology, medicine, and engineering.

### *Repercussions*

Several things are making this possible, and one of them is public anti-intellectualism. Perhaps this is not totally new in the U.S. but I remember how shocked I was when in the mid-late 1990s – and while at the University of Iowa – I had to fill out a form one week about time I spent working, and all because one vocal critic of state universities in Iowa kept complaining that U of Iowa faculty members only worked 6 hours a week (because in each course students and faculty members are in the classroom for 3 hours a week and the unit norm for faculty in the humanities and social sciences was two courses each semester). To counter this bad image, Iowa's central administrators wanted to collect hard data about the time Iowa faculty worked in their triple roles as teachers, researchers, and administrators. As I recall, the university presented the press with data showing that the average number of hours Iowa faculty worked each week was ca. 57. And I wondered who actually worked as little as that, since I knew what I worked and saw my colleagues doing about the same.

But I think I was wrong to be shocked. Increasingly our students and their parents worry about them getting jobs, and many of our undergraduates double-major in order to have one major they and their parents consider practical. Periodically some public figure mocks anthropology as useless. This happened earlier in this decade when Governor Scott of the State of Florida publicly named anthropology as a useless college major, despite U.S. federal government agencies identifying anthropology as one of the professions for which there will be many jobs in the near future. I mentioned this in my 2011 AAA Presidential Address (published in 2012) and Bonnie Urciuoli has been writing about the hidden, creeping manifestation of neoliberal economics in the rhetoric of U.S. colleges and universities for some years (e.g. 2014). At first I thought she was reading something into it that I didn't see, but I was wrong. She is right to identify (and rail against) all the talk about skills in courses, college marketing, and curricula. I see it more and more. Students are supposed to acquire skills in college so they can adapt them, use them, and have them after college when they go to work in government or the private sector. Being curious, developing sharpness as critics and readers, and becoming well-rounded citizens is apparently no longer enough. Simply knowing things is clearly not valued enough.



**REFERENCES**

- Dominguez, Virginia R., 2012, Comfort Zones and Their Dangers: Who Are We? Qui Sommes-Nous?, The 2011 AAA Presidential Address, *American Anthropologist*, 114, 3: 394-405.
- Urciuoli, Bonnie, 2014, The Semiotic Production of the Good Student: A Peircian Look at the Commodification of Liberal Arts Education, *Signs and Society*, 2, 1: 56-83.