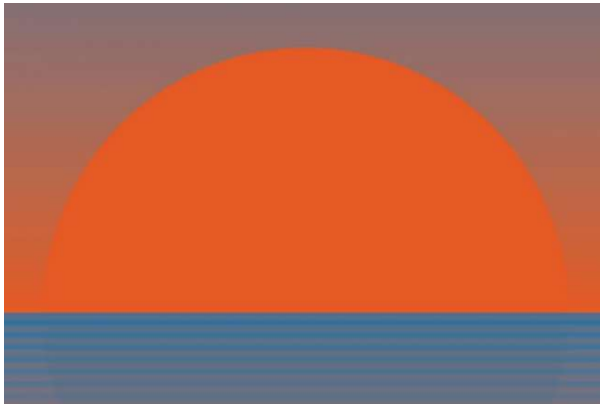


THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

The Forever Professors

Academics who don't retire are greedy, selfish, and bad for students



Chronicle Illustration by Scott Seymour

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One reason for high college costs and lack of higher-ed innovation: older professors putting off retirement.



Do graying professors have an ethical obligation to retire to free up jobs for the next generation?

I cried only once. In April, right after I left a departmental personnel meeting about the search for the new hire who would replace me. At the point where students were scheduled to come in and say what they thought was both good and bad about the drawing and painting program that I headed, I stood up (per an arrangement with my chairman) and recused myself so that the students might speak freely. I gathered my books and folders. Walking down an empty stairwell, I burst into tears.

Five years ago, I signed an "irrevocable agreement" with Hofstra University that paid me a bonus to retire "early." In my case, that meant at the age of 66. I saw retiring early as an existential embrace of freedom; a last grab to paint my pictures without interruption; to teach maybe, but only occasionally, as a visiting artist; to reread *The Magic Mountain*; to ponder the starry firmament above and the moral law within.

On commencement day this year, those five years had passed. Recovering my initial passion to leave full-time teaching behind required an almost daily fight to suppress the thought, "This is the last time I will ever do this." I couldn't help but hear Dylan singing in my head, "How does it feel / To be without a home / Like a complete unknown / Like a rolling stone?"

Many of my friends, family members, and colleagues think I opted for retirement because I grew tired of teaching. They're wrong. I love teaching. Conveying what I know, love, and affectionately question—painting and drawing, art, and relevant literature and philosophy (especially to college freshmen, who are too young to pretend, as do juniors and seniors, to be hiply jaded)—is enormously satisfying. Like all professors with a talent for teaching, I'm a bit of a performer. Even after all these years, during my final semester, I still felt a small rush of adrenaline whenever I walked into the classroom, as if I were heading onstage to do stand-up or make an acceptance speech.

After all, how many jobs are there, aside from that of a tenured full professor, where you are almost completely free to do your work your own way, without supervision? In how many jobs is there no way to be fired other than if you stumble off the deep end in some egregious way? How many jobs entail the challenge and excitement of repeatedly being asked to lead a group of young people through the brambles and underbrush and from there on up into the hills of knowledge? In sum, how many jobs offer you a good salary and more than decent benefits to do what you love?

By any measure—course enrollments, teacher evaluations, testimony from students and colleagues, peer observations and evaluations, and even RateMyProfessor.com—I'm a fine teacher, even an exceptional one, though hardly perfect: One student called me, in writing, an "über bitch." Although I don't have the energy I had when I was 40, or even 50, compared with most professors in their 60s, I'm an Amazon. I'm also far smarter and cagier about how to teach than when I was a young whippersnapper never more than a couple of steps ahead of my students.

Nevertheless, in June I found myself staring at a stack of Medicare "booklets" (if you can call 120 pages a "booklet") and surfing various websites, trying to grasp the implications of Medicare Part B. Repeatedly, I was exhorted to "choose the Medicare Part B plan that's right for you." The American Association of Retired Persons Medicare handbook, deceptively titled "Hello Simplicity," is typical: endless paragraphs of incomprehensible blather interspersed with pages of charts bearing an uncanny and discomfiting resemblance to outcomes-assessment rubrics. Had I known that choosing the "plan that's right" for me would be so laborious, and so expensive, I doubt I would have had the gumption to retire early—or, come to think of it, to retire at all.

Ageism in Academe

"Senior faculty. It sounds like an honorific. It isn't. It's more a sort of stigmata...I'm called 'senior faculty' quite a lot."

The 1994 law ending mandatory retirement at age 70 for university professors substantially mitigated the problem of age discrimination within universities. But out of this law a vexing new problem has emerged—a graying—yea, whitening—professoriate. The law, which

allows tenured faculty members to teach as long as they want—well past 70, or until they're carried out of the classroom on a gurney—means professors are increasingly delaying retirement past age 70 or even choosing not to retire at all.

Like so much else in American life, deciding when to retire from academe has evolved into a strictly private and personal matter, without any guiding rules, ethical context, or sense of obligation to do what's best—for one's students, department, or institution. Only the vaguest questions—and sometimes not even those—are legally permitted. An administrator's asking, "When do you think you might retire?" can bring on an EEOC complaint or a lawsuit. Substantive departmental or faculty discussions about retirement simply do not occur.

University professors may be more educated than the average American, but now that there's no mandatory retirement age, their decisions about when to leave prove that they are as self-interested as any of their countrymen. When professors continue to teach past 70, they behave in exactly the same way as when we decide to drive a car on a national holiday. Who among us stops to connect the dots between our decision to drive and a traffic jam, or that traffic jam and global warming?

Despite the boomer claim that 70 is the new 50, and the actuarial fact that those who live in industrialized countries and make it to the age of 65 have a life expectancy reaching well into the 80s, 70 remains what it has always been—old. By the one measure that should count for college faculty—how college students perceive their professors—it is definitively old. Keeping physically fit, wearing Levi's, posting pictures on Instagram, or continually sneaking peeks at one's iPhone don't count for squat with students, who, after all, have grandparents who are 70, if not younger.

To invoke Horace, professors can drive out Nature with a pitchfork, but she'll come right back in. Aging is Nature's domain, and cannot be kneaded into a relativist cultural construct. It's her means of leading us onto the off-ramp of life.

Professors approaching 70 who are still enamored with hanging out with students and colleagues, or even fretting about money, have an ethical obligation to step back and think seriously about quitting. If they do remain on the job, they should at least openly acknowledge they're doing it mostly for themselves.

Of course, there are exceptions. Some professors, especially in the humanities, become more brilliant as they grow older—coming up with their best ideas and delivering sagacity to their students. And some research scientists haul in the big bucks even when they're old. But those cases are much rarer than older professors vainly like to think.

What's far more likely is a version of what I observed in my own department—an art-history professor in his late 70s who prowled the halls up until a few years ago. He didn't appear to be able to use email, and we all knew he was a terribly easy grader. Even so, he faithfully met his classes and always attended department meetings, where he hardly ever said a word. Every time he passed me in the hall, he'd wag his finger at me and sardonically remark, "The only good artist is a dead artist."

The average age for all tenured professors nationwide is now approaching 55 and creeping upward; the number of professors 65 and older more than doubled between 2000 and 2011. In spite of those numbers, according to a Fidelity Investments study conducted about a year ago, three-quarters of professors between 49 and 67 say they will either delay retirement past age 65 or—gasp!—never retire at all. They ignore, or are oblivious to, the larger implications for their students, their departments, and their colleges.

And they delude themselves about their reasons for hanging on. In the Fidelity survey, 80 percent of those responding said their primary reason for wanting to continue as faculty members was not that they needed the money but for "personal or professional" reasons. A Fidelity spokesman offered what seemed to

me a naïve interpretation of that answer: "Higher-education employees, especially faculty, are deeply committed to their students, education, and the institutions they serve."

Maybe. But "commitment to higher education" covers some selfish pleasures.

First, teaching is fun. It offers a sanctioned "low-level narcissism," as one friend put it, that's hard to find anywhere else in life other than in show business.

Second, the continual replenishment, each autumn, of fresh-faced 18-year-olds causes the bulk of the professoriate to feel as if we are hardly aging at all. Third, because teaching is part of a life of the mind, by teaching to 70 and beyond, professors feel they provide living proof, to anyone who might question them, that their minds remain sharp as tacks. Finally, remaining within the confines of academe past 70 not only protects professors from the economic and professional uncertainties of life, but also substantially pumps up their wealth at the end of their careers.

The inconvenient truth is that faculty who delay retirement harm students, who in most cases would benefit from being taught by someone younger than 70, even younger than 65. The salient point is not that younger professors are better pedagogues (sometimes they are, sometimes they aren't), but that they are more likely to be current in their fields and to bring that currency into their teaching.

Septuagenarian faculty members also cost colleges more than younger faculty—in the form of higher salaries, higher health-care costs, and higher employer-matched retirement contributions. Even if these costs pale in comparison to paying for bloated administrations, it's wrong to pretend they don't matter.

Worst of all, their presence stifles change. I'm not talking about mindless change for change's sake, but the kind of change necessary to keep an institution thriving. A healthy university consists of departments with a balanced mix of new hires (full of energy, ambition, and fresh ideas), middle-aged faculty members at the height of their productivity, and older faculty with wisdom and a deep understanding of the evolving mission of their departments and universities. Disrupt that balance, and the foundation of an institution's strength is undermined.

On average, graduate students earn their Ph.D.'s at the age of 34, and those landing tenure-track jobs tend to do so in their mid-to-late 30s. Young faculty members aspiring to full-time tenure-track jobs as well as newly minted doctorate holders have a right to be worried, if not resentful, as they watch older faculty clinging to jobs, blocking their chance of entering what remains of the ever-diminishing pool of full-time academic jobs. By delaying retirement, older faculty members, in effect, tell the younger generation of wannabe professors to table their aspirations to teach full time, or maybe even to give them up entirely.

Old professors who refuse to retire hobble an institution's ability to control its academic priorities. Before 1994, every tenure hire had a clearly defined end date; afterward, it became anyone's guess how long a tenured professor would hang around. Administrators must now factor into the total cost of its tenure lines the fact that a significant number of tenured faculty members will end up teaching—at the top salary and benefits level of a full professor, mind you—much longer than they did 20 years ago.

It is not my place to judge, individually, my colleagues and friends who are choosing to teach past 70. I know they have their reasons, almost all of which seem necessary to them. But that doesn't prevent me from judging the way older professors, as a group, are crippling university faculties. Imagine a department of 15 full-time faculty members, five of whom are full professors over 65. If those

five delay retirement until they are 73 and the department can't expand, they block new hires for the next eight years. They also dampen the prospects for promotion of faculty members at the associate level, as no dean wants a department overloaded with full professors. Those older full professors also cow junior faculty into an even more "to get along, go along" mentality than the hazing the tenure process already creates.

In the conjoined studio and art-history department that I called home until this past May, the average age is 65, and everyone is tenured or on the tenure track. Half of the full-time faculty are full professors in their 70s; only one of those has publicly announced arrangements to retire—in a couple of years.

My department might be conspicuously old (not to mention top-heavy in terms of rank, lacking both assistant professors and instructors), but it's not that much of an anomaly compared with what's happening at other universities. One-third of the faculty at Cornell is 60 or older. It's more than 25 percent at the University of Virginia, the University of Texas at Austin, Duke University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

One argument offered against professors' retiring before 70 is that their productivity (measured quantitatively by scholarly publications and professional activity) turns out not to decline significantly. Instead, productivity after 70 is associated with professors who are already productive before they reached that age. Unproductive ones? Let's just say a professor doesn't change his spots. There's also the probability of an old-boys'/old-girls' network kicking in: Older professors are better known than younger ones, and when others in their cohort are in positions to issue conference invitations, it's natural for them to choose professors they've heard of.

But what about other kinds of faculty productivity? For example, how energetic is a professor in the classroom once he or she hits 70? Do professors in their mid-70s carry their share of departmental or university committee work? These are

almost entirely matters of quality (for example, it's the work one does on a committee, not the number of committees of which one is nominally a member, that tells the tale). Common sense and experience both point to younger faculty as generally more energetic in their teaching and university service—more apt to lead students on field trips, or do the donkey work of a curriculum committee, for example—than those over 70.

Finally, it's worth noting that older faculty, by hogging an unfair share of the budget devoted to faculty salaries, exemplify the tragedy playing out in the larger social and economic arenas of all industrialized nations, where older members of a society, compared with younger groups, now possess a disproportionate share of a country's wealth.

In short, American academe has created a continuing disaster by resting faculty retirement solely on the cornerstones of senior professors' self-interest and self-assessment. Unless higher education comes up with a mechanism—or social consensus—that makes retiring by 70 the honorable and decent thing to do, everyone's individual "right to work" past 70 will crush the young. Yes, continuing to be a full-time tenured professor past 70 ought to be possible, but it should be a rare privilege reserved only for the most productive and effective-in-the-classroom scholars, artists, and research scientists.

It is hard to explain sometimes that I desperately want to embrace, rather than deny, my final phase of life, and that doing this requires that I set myself up in a situation where I can sense the urgency of life. For me, that mostly means being a full-time painter again, with the chance to make just a few more good pictures before I die. I want to face retirement the way Prospero, directly addressing the audience at the end of *The Tempest*, voluntarily surrendered his magical powers:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
And what strength I have's mine own,
Which is most faint: ...
Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant.

Professors are blind to the incontrovertible fact that in the scheme of things, they are replaceable cogs who are forgotten the moment they are gone. That is not a bad thing, but rather the heart of institutional strength.

Along with Prospero's speech, Marcus Aurelius's Meditations ought to be required reading for professors, for this philosopher-emperor drives home that forgetting is liberating for everyone: "The nature of the Universe loves nothing so much as to change the things which are, and to make new things like them."

I would be lying were I to deny the sense of loss that came over me, gradually, during my last year of teaching. And it wasn't merely emotional. My husband and I are fairly numerate, but we had calculated the cost of retirement only roughly. Jolts of intense bourgeois insecurity hit me on those drizzly winter days when I'd look out the train window on my way to school and stare at the endless rows of little houses in Queens.

Emptying my office a little at a time, over the course of the year, was my approach to leaving my job. On the day of graduation, I was left with just a couple of boxes of books and a few pictures. On my way out, I pulled out my name plaque from the holder by the side of my office door and tossed it into the trash.

A few days later, I talked to Dave Hickey

about my retirement. Dave is a 74-year-old art critic who taught—contentiously—at a number of universities. He said, "The problem with

teaching is that it offers an ongoing sense of redemption. In the real world, which you have now re-entered, if you muck up, there are consequences. In the university, you get a new semester to pretend nothing bad ever happened."

Then he added, "You're free now, Laurie. Make something of it."

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