

Professional Insecurity in a Fraught Environment

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Now that more than 75 percent of the instructors teaching in higher education in the United States [do not have tenure](#), it is important to think about how the current political climate might affect those vulnerable teachers. Although we should pay attention to how all faculty are being threatened, nontenured faculty are in an especially vulnerable position because they often lack any type of academic freedom or shared governance rights. In other words, they are a class without representation, and they usually can be let go at any time for any reason. That type of precarious employment, which is spreading all over the world to all types of occupations, creates a high level of professional insecurity and helps to feed the power of the growing managerial class.

In the case of higher education, we need to recognize that this new faculty majority often relies on getting high student evaluations in order to keep their jobs or earn pay increases. The emphasis on pleasing students not only can result in grade inflation and defensive teaching, but it also places the teacher in an impossible situation when dealing with political issues in a polarized environment. While some students want teachers to talk about political issues, many students will turn against an instructor who does not share their own ideological perspective. Sometimes that type of political disagreement is transformed in student evaluations into vague complaints about the teacher's attitude or personality.

In this fraught cultural environment, practically everyone feels that they are being censored or silenced or ignored. For example, some of my conservative students have told me that they feel like they are the real minorities on campus, and even though Donald Trump won the U.S. presidency, they still think they cannot express their true opinions. On the other side, some of my self-identified progressive activist students believe that political correctness makes it hard to have an open discussion: from their perspective, since anything can be perceived as a microaggression, people tend to silence themselves. Moreover, the themes of political correctness, safe spaces, trigger warnings and free speech have become contentious issues on both the right and the left.

What I am describing is an educational environment where almost everyone is afraid to speak. The nontenured faculty members are fearful of losing their jobs, the conservative students see themselves as a censored minority and the progressive students are afraid of being called out for their privilege or lack of political correctness. Making matters worse is that students are often socialized by their large lecture classes to simply remain passive and silent.

It appears that we are facing a perfect storm where free speech and real debate are no longer possible. One way of countering this culture is to stop relying on student evaluations to assess nontenured faculty. If we want teachers to promote open dialogue in their classes, they should not have to be afraid that they will lose their jobs for promoting the free exchange of ideas. Therefore, we need to rely more on the peer review of instruction, and we have to stop using the easy way out. In short, we have to change how nontenured faculty members are evaluated.

Non-tenure-track faculty should be empowered to observe and review one another's courses using established review criteria. It is also helpful to have experienced faculty with expertise in pedagogy involved in the peer-review process of teaching. By examining and discussing effective instructional methods, all faculty members can participate in improving the quality of education.

It is also essential that to protect free speech and open academic dialogue, we should realize that the majority of faculty members no longer have academic freedom or the right to vote in their departments and faculty senates. In order to change this undemocratic situation, tenured professors should understand that it is to their advantage to extend academic freedom and shared governance to all faculty members, regardless of their tenure status. If we do not work together to fight back against the current political climate, we will all suffer together.

