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## We Need to See Retirement as a Hiring Issue



*Adam Nicklewicz for The Chronicle Review*

*By Christopher Phelps*

In his excellent essay on the dour state of the academic job market, "[We Need to Acknowledge the Realities of Employment in the Humanities](#)" (*The Chronicle Review*, April 4), Peter Conn writes with admirable candor about the aging of the professoriate. Something like 7 to 9 percent of the faculties at private research universities, he estimates, are now over 70, well past traditional retirement age. This has had the effect of blocking opportunities for younger scholars.

Ever since the elimination of mandatory retirement for college and university professors in 1994, professorial career spans have lengthened. The outsized salaries and benefits of very senior scholars occupy budgetary lines that might otherwise be freed to hire twice as many or more junior replacements. While there is no guarantee that an administration will fill a particular line when a professor retires, let alone add new ones, the aging of the professoriate on the whole indisputably diminishes opportunities for young scholars.

This situation risks a bitter, senseless war of resentment: youth against elders. But after pinpointing the problem with unusual lucidity, Conn drops the topic. Among his several recommendations as to how universities should recalibrate to meet the jobs crisis, retirement is not mentioned once.

This disconnect is symptomatic. In a 2007 survey of 567 colleges and universities conducted by Valerie Martin Conley for the American Association of University Professors, only 19 percent of institutions held that the retirement of older professors was an important institutional matter. The very same survey found that 96 percent of institutions considered recruiting new professors important. In actuality, the two objectives are indistinguishable. Institutions are constrained in their ability to hire new professors at the assistant and associate levels so long as full professors increasingly work past 70.

Retirement is a hiring issue. Retirement is central to the renewal of the American university.

The academy has yet to devote adequate imagination or will to the retirement of scholars at the senior level. Fear of age-discrimination lawsuits may be to blame, in which case an irony is evident: Strictures meant to inhibit generational discrimination have had the effect of diminishing opportunities for a whole generation of scholars. (I write as a 44-year-old historian who has accepted employment abroad, in part because of circumscribed American opportunities.)

Scholars who wish to keep teaching late into life have the indisputable legal right to do so, and they deserve to do so without suffering the slightest aspersion. But institutions can and should do much more than they do now to make a timely retirement alluring. While most institutions of higher education have adopted at least one or two measures to promote faculty retirement, some have failed, surprisingly, to use even the most basic. Many others have not gone beyond the most obvious. A concert of compelling incentives, creative brainstorming, and integrated planning is demanded to encourage retirement.

Universities and colleges should consider the following options, some of them time-tested, to encourage prompt retirement:

**Provide retirement guidance at every level.** Faculty members should from the very outset of their careers be given sound financial counseling and inspired to envision their retirement. Anticipation is imperative; preparation cannot be left until age 50 or 60. Multiple scenarios should be used to illustrate the vibrant range of retirement possibilities—including travel, volunteerism, and continuing professional productivity, even including new careers. We ought to find an entirely new word for "retirement," given that so many retirees now stay intellectually active for decades, not

retreating from the life of the mind. I have in mind, for example, my friend the late Morris Slavin, who after retiring from Youngstown State wrote works on the French Revolution published by Harvard and Princeton University Presses while he was in his 70s. Given extended life expectancy, many retirees today probably think in terms similar to those often attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes: "Old age is 15 years older than I am." Institutions should enable financial advice well into retirement and tabulate opportunities in community service and paid consulting for emeriti with well-honed skill sets.

**Offer buyouts or extra payment.** Institutions ought to offer a buyout or cash payment for those retiring promptly. These bonuses may be structured in various ways. One is suggested by the plan at the University of Rochester, where full-time faculty members with lower salaries receive higher buyouts than those with higher salaries. This follows the reasoning that under the university's merit-pay system, pay correlates with productivity. The university benefits if lower-paid faculty members retire to make way for starting-level scholars; it will not suffer if high-profile maximum performers remain around for a few years. Another idea is to reduce the tax hit by permitting a rollover of the buyout sum into an IRA.

**Allow for phased retirement.** In phased-retirement offers, teaching load is reduced at a prorated salary in return for a commitment to waive tenure at a specified date. Such a plan allows faculty members to test-drive retirement. In the course of doing so, many find they enjoy their newfound freedom and retire earlier than projected. Universities also ought to consider permitting retired faculty members to teach occasionally on a per-course basis; this permits the institution to draw on the talents of seasoned teachers while reducing their cost to nominal levels. Studies show that faculty members consider incremental options far more attractive than straight buyouts.

**Offer continuing benefits.** A health-insurance bridge to age 65 is invaluable for early retirees. All retirees appreciate retaining institutional perks such as library borrowing, e-mail access, parking, tuition remission, discounted event tickets, fitness-center access, campus voice mail, and secretarial assistance. Lab space is critical for scholars in the natural sciences. New building design should include more attractive office space for retirees—private cubicles rather than dumping rooms. Early retirees might be permitted to keep travel and research funds for five or 10 years if they maintain an active research agenda (defined, say, by at least one significant publication annually when averaged over a rolling three-year period). Such gestures make retirement attractive by minimizing the loss of valued prerogatives and cost little when compared with the alternative of retaining aging faculty members at the top of the salary scale.

**Reconsider pension plans.** Contributors to defined-benefit (or traditional) pension plans tend to retire early. That is because they reach a point where there is no further marginal financial advantage in working. Contributors to defined-contribution retirement accounts, however, find that because of their late-career earning power they are able to amass staggering holdings for themselves or their heirs, particularly with employer matches. Defined-contribution plans, therefore, create a disincentive to retirement. While a wholesale move back to defined-benefit pension plans is unlikely, institutions might consider hybrid or combined plans. Such a combination would begin by providing a minimal defined-benefit plan to all faculty members and then offering a choice of either a more generous additional defined-benefit plan (making this the default option) or a supplemental defined-contribution plan. Such an arrangement would mean that at least a significant part of every faculty member's pension would be in a defined-benefit plan, diminishing the compelling financial incentive to work late into the sunset years. (Of my proposals, this may elicit the strongest objections, given the present defined-contribution vogue. It is, nevertheless, worth putting on the table for contemplation.)

**Create a culture of appreciation.** Discussions of retirement are often blind to intangibles of meaning, dignity, status, and community that underlie so many anxieties and hopes of individuals facing this important life decision. But these elements are axiomatic in the decision making of many potential retirees and should be engaged, not overlooked. Both altruism and desire for recognition, for example, might be satisfied by naming a one-year postdoctoral fellowship after each retiring faculty member, turning every retirement into a celebration of a life of service and a torch-passing to the next scholarly generation. Professional associations and foundations should consider setting aside grants and awards for retirees in the same way that certain grants now benefit writers of first books or junior scholars. That would validate post-employment scholarly life and support retirees who maintain active research agendas but often lack grant opportunities. Likewise, departments and programs should invite retired colleagues to present papers or tap them to introduce visiting speakers, signaling appreciation for their achievements and wisdom. If retirement is not isolating, if it need not mean cutting oneself off from academic life, it will be perceived not as the end of the line but as a path of continuity.

Many senior academics I know are perfectly happy to reach retirement and liberate themselves from committee meetings, grading, and other chores, leaving them with more time to focus on what really matters about the life of the mind. Given the right mix of financial incentives, positive moral reinforcement, and a welcoming atmosphere, an even higher proportion should be willing to make way for the next generation of scholars. Universities must seek every possible way to make retirement attractive by the age of 65 or 70, both by allocating the necessary resources and by

fostering a culture inclusive of those who have given lifetimes of dedicated service to higher education and still have so much to offer us.

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