

MEDIA ADVISORY

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Universities struggle with senior faculty's 'limited mobility'

Report suggests aging professoriate is preventing U.S. schools from recalibrating priorities, expanding course offerings, and diversifying faculty ranks long dominated by white males

U.S. colleges and universities have earned a global reputation for anticipating and addressing emerging societal problems, but many of those same institutions appear to be confounded by a challenge taking shape on their own campuses: a growing number of aging (if not aged) faculty members with no plans to retire.

That's the key takeaway from a new analysis by Richard A. Skinner, PhD, a two-time former university president who now serves as a senior consultant with the executive recruiting firm Harris Search Associates.

"A prolonged period of little or no turnover can breed institutional stagnation — a serious problem in any field of endeavor but a veritable deal-breaker in higher education, which society rightly holds accountable for producing new knowledge and insights," Skinner says in his just released report, *OK, Boomer ... or is it? The ramifications of American higher education's aging professoriate*.

Skinner says a nationwide faculty bottleneck has been building since Dec. 31, 1993, the expiration date of a federal statutory exemption that had allowed U.S. colleges and universities to enforce mandatory-retirement guidelines years after most other employers had lost that prerogative. Since then, most tenured professors across the country have had the right to remain in the classroom or lab as long as they desire — and thousands have taken full advantage of the opportunity.

Skinner's report cites studies suggesting that professors are more than twice as likely as the rest of the U.S. workforce to delay retirement — generally not because they need the money or benefits but rather because they derive a great deal of satisfaction from their work. A 2013 survey found that 60 percent of postsecondary faculty members planned to stick around past age 70 and that 15 percent intended to stay past age 80.

Skinner concluded that it's impossible to predict when the still-growing Baby Boomer "bubble" might burst, but, until then, he said, the implications are profound for various campus constituencies.

Administrators, for example, are left with limited ability to hire new faculty members, especially tenure-track faculty members, regardless of demand, Skinner said. As a result, he noted, schools can't recalibrate academic priorities, expand course offerings, groom prospective leaders, or diversify faculty ranks that are most likely dominated by white males.

Conversely, instead of landing tenure-track teaching positions, many newly minted PhDs and other aspiring academics are forced to accept contract, or contingent, appointments that offer far less money and virtually no long-term job security — or leave teaching altogether.

More and more students, meanwhile, are finding themselves in classes led by professors who came of age in another era and have yet to embrace the latest teaching tools and techniques — or, worse still, have failed to stay abreast of advancements in their disciplines, Skinner said.

"We're not talking about some subtle update of the 1960s caricature that had age-addled professors struggling to figure out the intricacies of the overhead projector," he said.

Skinner's research led him to conclude that the bottleneck will defy easy fixes.

"The reimposition of a mandatory retirement age is highly unlikely, given the current makeup of Congress — the 116th Congress is among the oldest in the nation's history — and the unrivaled political heft of the Baby Boomer generation," he said.

"Don't bet on a major overhaul of the tenure system, either. No college or university wants to be known as the leader of a crusade to scrap policies that were put in place in the late 19th century to protect academic freedom and ensure institutional stability."

With few formal, or legal, "sticks" at their disposal, universities across the United States are testing a variety of "carrots" — inducements designed to make retirement less daunting to aging professors.

Some institutions, Skinner said, are offering generous one-time retirement bonuses — buyouts, essentially. Some are creating new titles for retired professors who give up teaching but remain active in research, and others are making office space and/or laboratory facilities available to retired faculty members who want to maintain a physical presence on campus.

Thus far, Skinner said, the bottleneck's impact appears to have been mitigated by an unprecedented expansion in postsecondary enrollment spanning the past 50 years. The revenue growth tied to that influx of students has, to an extent, enabled schools to hire "around" entrenched faculty, thereby meeting at least some of the demand for expertise in rapidly evolving — and expanding — fields such as engineering, medicine and computer science.

In 2026, however, U.S. postsecondary enrollment is projected to begin shrinking, Skinner noted.

"In short, at most of the nation's colleges and universities, fewer students and fewer tuition dollars will translate into fewer faculty positions," he said. "Something will have to give."

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