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# Humanities wither on the vine

Every new year brings reports on the state of the humanities in higher education, so brace yourself anew. On 7 January, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences released its "Humanities Indicators".

This is a prototype collaborative project that aims to do what leaders in science and engineering have been doing for decades: provide policymakers with a systematic data resource. The indicators are many and varied, but discouraging all the same.

Over the past 30 years, the budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities has fallen by one third, and 87 per cent of what remains goes to organisations other than colleges and universities.

Of total research spending by colleges and universities in 2006, the humanities received a 0.45 per cent share. Unlike revenue-generating colleagues in the sciences, law, business and economics, academics in the humanities depend entirely on their institutions for support.

Two new reports locate the consequences of this dependency in the inability of tenured faculty to renew itself. *Education in the Balance: A Report on the Academic Workforce in English*, co-authored by the Modern Language Association and the Association of Departments of English, shows dramatic changes running in one direction.

"The data show a decline of tenured and tenure-track faculty members' presence in all areas of the undergraduate English curriculum across all institutional types," it says.

The second report reads like an autopsy. *Reversing Course: The Troubled State of Academic Staffing*, by the American Federation of Teachers, finds that "contingent faculty members and instructors are now teaching a [majority] of all undergraduate public college courses".

For bearing this burden, they are earning disproportionately lower wages than tenured staff and doing without health insurance, contracts, offices, computers, job security and other benefits.

"With [President Barack] Obama's election, and with these reports supporting our assertions, now is the time to act," says Gregory Zobel, editor of the blog *Adjunct Advice*. He praises the publicity value of the reports, which lack enforcement power, and he believes they may aid in forming a national union devoted to contingent workers in higher education.

This strategy seems to me equally shrewd and hopeless: shrewd because it acknowledges that US colleges and universities, being primarily interested in making money and training careerists, must be met at the level of power; hopeless for all the reasons that confront powerless, diffuse and exploited groups.

The truth is that cultural officials in America have ignored the rationalisation of the academic labour market for decades because it was convenient for them to do so. Until the release of the Humanities Indicators, there was little basic information about the state of the field.

If the reports prove anything, it is that the scale of the problem is now too great to reverse, and the proposed reforms are little more than crumbs.

The old professoriate is dying. What next? The US has a long history of educational innovation. I think the humanities are most likely to experience a renaissance by creating new institutions, rather than relying on the same colleges and universities that have abandoned them.

John Summers is author of *Every Fury on Earth* and editor of *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*.



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