

Budget Activism: A Strategy To Address Contingency—and Tenure

Posted on February 8, 2021 by Aimee Loiselle

For decades, austerity and financialization have impacted labor on public and private campuses. When administrators and boards structure budgets to enforce top-down fiscal “discipline,” support the highest return on investment, and cultivate endowments, they push cuts into most academic departments and programs.

These cuts instigate a symbiosis of reducing permanent, full-time, and tenure-track positions while necessitating widespread contingent labor to meet departmental, student services, and institutional requirements and objectives. This context means advocating tenure cannot be the best way to address contingency or vice versa. Even the decline of tenure positions and increase of adjuncts is not a straightforward causal relationship, i.e. the elimination of a tenure line to replace it directly with an adjunct. They are usually corresponding consequences of larger budget practices.

Budget activism—federal, state, and campus—offers the best approach. When it becomes the overall strategy, new tactics emerge. Faculty groups can research federal numbers, state higher education revenues, and details from campus financial reports to propose alternative budgets with reconfigured funding streams and expenses. New allies include staff, students, parents, alumni, and local businesses, which all have a stake in well-funded colleges and universities, with fairly paid and regularly present employees (but don’t necessarily have an interest in tenure per se).

It’s time to dig into the hard numbers—hire experts in university finance or forensic accountants if needed. Time to answer vital questions like: what’s happened to per student funding for instruction and support over the past ten years, what percentage of the budget goes to administrators, construction, institutional debt financing? What’s happened to the number of courses, office hours, and academic services provided by full-time faculty and staff available for consistent student access? What’s the percentage decline in faculty with the time and resources to conduct research and generate knowledge, especially in the arts and humanities?

Federal budget activism involves lobbying congressional representatives and education committees. The 2021 AFT/AAUP campaign for funding reform provides one avenue. It seeks to rejuvenate higher education by moving federal action past the FAFSA, Pell Grants, and student loans and toward subsidizing teaching and research, fair labor practices, and tuition. The group [Scholars for a New Deal in Higher Education](#) (SFNDHE) has allied with the progressive [Roosevelt Institute](#) to develop proposals as well.

Budget activism at the state level focuses on each public system, from its flagship university to remote campuses. Cuts do not work for state universities and colleges, which have dramatically increased contingent labor while raising tuition and fees. Cuts do not work to give all interested students the public option. Cuts do not work for regional innovation or maintaining a robust representative democracy. Cuts do not work.

Proposing defined revenue streams for tenure-track positions might be one tactic at the campus level. Budget activism, however, highlights the total institutional budget and the intertwined goals of addressing contingent labor, outsourced student services, and student debt along with advocating tenure. People might envision tenure lines as an expected outcome, but their efforts advance a quantified restructuring of the campus budget.

Throughout the twentieth century, the convention of tenure was under regular ideological assault. But the austerity and financialization of the past thirty years have been the most effective weapons, sending shrapnel through every academic department and beyond. For this reason, scholars cannot make simple line item requests. Campuses require reconfigured budgets that mandate certain funds for teaching and research, restrict certain funds from administration and construction, and reverse the upward pressure on tuition.

Resources:

[American Association of University Professors](#) (AAUP)

[American Federation of Teachers](#) (AFT)

[Debt Collective](#)

[Financial Reporting in Higher Education](#)

[Guide to Analyzing University & College Financial Statements](#)

[New Faculty Majority](#)

[Roosevelt Institute](#)

[Scholars for a New Deal in Higher Education](#) (SFNDHE)

[Tenure for the Common Good](#)

[University Debt Crisis](#)

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