The Faculty-Retirement Conundrum
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College professors who are over 65 recount many reasons for staying on: loving their work and wanting to complete major projects but also needing their income and fearing what lies beyond. As they hesitate, they cannot ignore assertions that if only they would retire, they might free up more jobs for new Ph.D. recipients. The articles in this collection cover the debate over the timing of faculty retirements and describe strategies college officials are using to make professors’ transition to retirement less daunting.

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Cover Illustration by David Cutler for The Chronicle
When Carole Goldberg became vice chancellor for academic personnel at the University of California at Los Angeles, in 2011, she had a question. Under the public institution’s pension plan, some 200 tenured professors with more than 35 years of university service were eligible for what she says was a generous deal. Some, she says, could even have received more annual income as retirees than as full-time faculty members. But why were so few taking advantage of it?

“What I learned was that there was a sense among senior faculty that retirement marked a severance of their relationship with the university — a disruption of their sense of identity,” she says. “That was a discouragement to retirement.”

UCLA isn’t alone in trying to find out what it takes to get more professors to retire. Many colleges, public and private, large and small, are grappling with a graying faculty, primarily because of the abolition of mandatory retirement at colleges in 1994. From 1995 to 2015, the latest year for which data are available, the share of postsecondary in-
In 2008, UCLA started Pathways to Retirement, which allows faculty members to map out the end of their employment. They negotiate perks like a reduced teaching load before retirement or continued support for their research after retirement in exchange for a commitment to step down as far ahead as two years in the future. For the university, the agreements make long-term personnel planning easier.

When she took her job, Ms. Goldberg wanted more people to take advantage of the agreements, so she focused on getting the word out. She sent emails to all faculty members, not just senior professors, to let them know about the program and

**Colleges can help graying faculty members view retirement as an opportunity, rather than as a threat.**

**Those reluctant to retire**

Most older faculty members plan by choice to work beyond traditional retirement age, according to a 2015 survey of more than 700 tenured professors age 50 or older.
the ways they can stay connected to the campus in retirement. Retirees can have steeply discounted parking fees, she noted in the message, and professors active in research may even be able to get the title “research professor,” which could be more helpful than “emeritus professor” in applying for grants.

“I began to augment and embellish these letters with an account of all the opportunities and programs, discounts, and everything that was available to faculty when they retired,” she says. “It was a drumbeat of messages saying we want you to stay engaged. This is not about sending you away.”

Evidence suggests that the strategy is working. In 2011, 10 pathway agreements were signed. The most recent two years have seen big increases, with 34 signed in 2015 and 48 in 2016. And while it’s too soon to call that a trend, Ms. Goldberg says the increase in agreements is translating to an overall increase in the number of faculty members retiring. (These agreements may even become more important because UCLA won’t be as generous to retiring faculty members in the future as it is now, as a result of recent changes in its pension plan.)

UCLA’s efforts to keep retired professors connected to the institution are another factor in the increased number of retirements, Ms. Goldberg says. Among other activities, retirees can attend bimonthly workshops, where technology advisers help them navigate their electronic devices.

Other institutions have tried similar approaches. At the University of Southern California, retirees are encouraged to attend various social events, including one this month where they met to listen to a lecture by Robert M. Shrum, a USC political-science professor and former speechwriter for several Democratic presidential candidates, about why Donald Trump won the presidential election.

“We’re now seeing these kinds of things happening at a number of institutions in a more official way than they have in the past,” says Claire A. Van Ummersen, who edited a 2014 book, *Faculty Retirement: Best Practices for Navigating the Transition*. While president of Cleveland State University, Ms. Van Ummersen helped create a faculty group for retirees. “They wanted so much to stay connected with the university,” she says. “They wanted things like information about what was going on around campus and access to the library.”

**7 Ways to Ease the Transition to Retirement**

*Colleges are using a variety of approaches to make retirement an attractive option for tenured faculty members. Here are seven examples.*

**Phased retirement**

Bentley University allows faculty members to phase into retirement over a few years by working less for the same or reduced pay. The process reduces the shock of leaving academia cold turkey, and it allows the university to make planning for new hires easier.

**Retirement payment**

To encourage professors to consider retiring at ages 65 to 70, Princeton University offers them a one-time payment, on a sliding scale, for signing a commitment to retire in a few years. Those age 69, for example, get a sum equal to half of their annual salary, while those age 65 get 1.5 times their salary.

**Faculty-retirement liaison**

A few institutions in the University of California system are hiring retired professors as liaisons who can meet with faculty members to help navigate retirement-related issues like how to negotiate an exit with a dean and how to remain engaged with the university in retirement.

**New titles**

The University of California at Los Angeles created a “research professor” title for professors who stay active in research after they retire. The title, administrators say, gives faculty members an advantage when applying for grants by indicating active engagement in a way that “emeritus professor” does not.

**Terminal sabbaticals**

Widener University this year proposed a sabbatical from which professors do not return to the faculty. The sabbatical could involve a traditional activity, like writing a book, or something unconventional, like revamping the curriculum.

**Planning agreements**

In 2008, UCLA created a program in which faculty members can negotiate perks for the last years of their employment — for example, a reduced load of teaching to pursue a research project. These agreements allow departments to better plan their hiring decisions.

**Post-retirement programming**

The University of Southern California looks for ways to keep retired scholars engaged on campus and in the community. Administrators created a “college” in the Emeriti Center that arranges lectures, short courses, and book clubs for retirees.
times so far. For Mr. Garton, 59, a key concern is whether he has enough money to retire. “It’s kind of late in the game,” he says, poking a French fry into ketchup and wondering about his retirement-savings account. “But I don’t know whether I should increase my contributions.” Mr. Garton can competently manage academic finances — he’s director of the university’s computer music center. But his own are another story. “At home,” he says, “I’m hopeless.”

Mr. Chalmers walked him through his options. He could take a buyout at a year’s worth of salary if he waited until age 65. But an option available to him right now was phased retirement. Mr. Garton, or any other professor at least 55 years old with 10 years of service, could work progressively less over five years with a corresponding reduction in salary.

Mr. Garton’s case shows the limitations that colleges face in encouraging faculty retirement. He had expected to be a professor until he died, but outside circumstances — a diagnosis of multiple myeloma and the birth of his grandchild this year — made him think in earnest about retiring. Even with a desire to retire, though, a decision to do so requires knowledge about the options.

“The phasing thing is interesting to me,” Mr. Garton says, after Mr. Chalmers explains to him how it works. “It’s like having my cake and eating it, too.”

Potential confusion about retirement options is a disincentive, says Janette Brown, executive director of the Association of Retirement Organizations in Higher Education. Many professors “are comfortable and don’t want to think about doing something different,” she says. “It’s too difficult to figure out their finances and their health care, and they don’t have anyone who can help them through the process, so they figure, I’m just going to keep doing what I’m doing. Why not? I get paid for it.”

Many colleges, like Columbia, are starting to offer the phased-retirement option. They allow faculty members to gradually wind down their role as tenured professors over one or more years, easing the transition to no longer being a professor.

Bentley University, a private college in Waltham, Mass., started a program in 2004 that allows faculty members to phase into retirement over one, two, or three years at full or reduced salary.

The option made sense to David Carhart, a mathematical-sciences professor there. His wife isn’t old enough for Medicare, so phasing into retirement over three years has allowed the two of
them to stay on Bentley’s health-care plan.

Mr. Carhart used to teach three courses a semester. Under his agreement, he now teaches one course, for two-thirds of his former pay, for three years. “Do the math,” he says. “I’m getting a free year in there somewhere.”

The program is letting him wind down his career as a professor, he says. For example, he was able to gradually end his role as a chair of his department’s promotion-and-tenure committee. “It was a very nice way to say, I’ve got three years, but I know I’m leaving in June 2017,” he says. “Let me get another chair in place and work with that chair so they know what they are doing, so I can leave with a clean conscience.”

At first only a few people opted in to Bentley’s retirement program. One reason was that for some professors who were not teaching a typical full load of courses, focusing on research would mean teaching more classes, not fewer.

In 2008, the university changed the program. The incentive was no longer a reduction in teaching. Instead it was a reduction in work generally, whether teaching, research, or service. “This allowed us to really meet the needs of the institution and the faculty member,” says Vicki V. Lafarge, associate dean for academic affairs. “The flexibility made it more attractive to more people.”

From 2004 to 2008, 14 tenured faculty members eligible for the program retired. From 2012 to 2016, 26 have used the phaseout option. (The small college has about 280 faculty members.)

For Ms. Lafarge, the goal isn’t to get professors to retire but to create a campus culture in which retirement is seen as a natural transition.

“You don’t want to meet with a department chair and say, Oh boy, how do we get this person to retire?” she says. “We just want people to know it’s an option.”

F or Joseph Margolis, retirement is not an option.

The 92-year-old philosophy professor at Temple University still supervises doctoral students, delivers lectures, and teaches a full course load. His latest book, Toward a Metaphysics of Culture, was released this year.

“I’m at the top of my form,” says Mr. Margolis, who fought in the Battle of the Bulge.

Temple offers a phased-retirement option, but he isn’t interested. He loves everything about being a professor and isn’t convinced of the value of older faculty members’ stepping aside to make way for younger scholars.

Administrators know that some senior faculty members like Mr. Margolis continue to make strong contributions, and that no incentive is likely to make retirement appealing.

Incentives are tools that won’t necessarily persuade someone to retire but might help to ease what can be a difficult transition, college officials say.

Take Mr. Chalmers, director of Columbia’s faculty-retirement office. The political-science scholar says he doesn’t know whether he would have retired in 2005 if he had not been able to work out an agreement in which he would continue to teach a course. More than a decade after retiring, he still teaches at Columbia.

“My experience shows there are all sorts of ways retirees could continue to work or stay engaged at the university,” he says.

“It’s just amazing how many people haven’t thought through their options.”

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Retiring from the faculty can be an overwhelming experience. Professors must be prepared financially, of course, but they also need to figure out what to do when the professional role that has for so long defined them comes to an end.

To help with the transition, the University of California at Los Angeles created a faculty-retirement liaison. In this part-time position, a retired professor serves as something of a guide for faculty members considering retirement, helping them to navigate the complexities of their departure from the professoriate.

David Lopez, who retired as a sociology professor and department head in 2010 after 40 years at the university, started in the new role last year. He spoke with The Chronicle about how he measures success in his job, what negotiating advice he gives faculty members, and the need for flexibility in retirement agreements. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q. What are professors considering retirement from UCLA worried about?
A. Their primary concern is not, Will I have enough money to last until I die? Their primary concern is how they can continue involvement with their profession and often with UCLA. They’re thinking about how to maintain their research.

Q. Who are you hoping to reach?
A. The UCLA faculty has more than 300 faculty members who are at retirement age or well beyond and have the financial resources, as far as we can tell, that they won’t in any way suffer financially if they retired. That’s kind of my target audience.

Q. You’re charting a new path with your job. How do you measure success?
A. I’m paying attention to two metrics. One is just the overall number of people retiring. A key part of this is also helping the planning process of retirement, which has been chaotic. We’ve seen very substantial increases in the number of faculty members sitting in on a series of retirement-planning workshops. Last year we saw a threefold increase in the number of faculty members signing Pathways to Retirement agreements. [The program allows UCLA professors to map out the end of their employment, which also helps the university with planning; see article on Page 4.]

Q. What do you think is responsible for the increase?
A. A lot of this is teaching faculty the nuts and bolts of what it means to retire at a big place like the University of California, like the details of your pension plan, how your medical coverage changes, and just sitting down and connecting everything together. A lot of my time is spent helping people work out the various bits and pieces and make sure they don’t mess up the process.

One interesting thing I found is that some very eminent researchers might have no sense of how much money they have in the bank or in retirement accounts, be-
cause they haven’t opened their statement since 1995.

Q. A big part of your job is helping faculty members negotiate with deans and department heads. What sorts of advice do you give?

A. Based on my sense of the department involved, I try to get people to ask for a little more than they think they can get, but not too much more. A department chair is not going to guarantee you can have your office for the rest of your life, or give you $100,000 a year to finance whatever personal research you want to do. Negotiating is the only way to really get a sense of how much an institution can actually do.

Q. You have the experience of being on the other side of the negotiating table as a former department head.

A. Yes, so I do have a sense of what’s possible. But I don’t try to tamp down people’s expectations. If someone wants a very particular thing, I suggest to them that they may have to ask for a little less of something else.

Q. I often hear the frustration of professors who worry that a colleague is getting a better deal than they are. They wish the process of negotiating a retirement agreement was more fair and transparent. How do you balance transparency and flexibility?

A. The F-word — “fair” — is a word I try to avoid. Nothing is fair at a competitive research university. You’re not going to be treated like everybody else. There are certain things faculty have in common, like our wonderful defined-benefit pension. But the circumstances of faculty members will vary a great deal. Someone retiring from the theater-arts department doesn’t have the same kind of professional life as someone retiring from neurology. For some people, $10,000 is a lot of money for research. For others it’s a rounding error. At a diverse institution like UCLA, where faculty have the basics of their financial future pretty much worked out, there has to be a lot of flexibility.

Q. Do you see your role as creating opportunities for faculty to remain engaged after retirement, or as connecting faculty members with opportunities that already exist?

A. A little of both. I’m trying to literally make space for emeriti. But I’m also figuratively making space for emeriti. And there’s also kind of a bully-pulpit quality, too. By asserting that people can have a fulfilling life on campus after retirement, I’d like to think that people will believe that retirement is a natural part of a professor’s career at a place like UCLA.

That doesn’t mean you walk into the forest and die for the sake of the tribe. Quite the contrary. That means you continue to run a lab or write books about obscure poets or teach undergraduates. But at the same time, you’ve made space for other people to start climbing up the ladder of faculty careers.

Advice to potential retirees on negotiating an exit deal:
“I try to get people to ask for a little more than they think they can get, but not too much more.”

Originally published on November 27, 2016
ON MY 65TH BIRTHDAY I began to ponder the prospect of a future without the academic identity that had taken decades to construct. It was a disconcerting moment. I had watched my parents pass into retirement and observed colleagues leaving my department, some reappearing occasionally over the next few years, others never to be seen again.

Until that birthday, however, I had given little thought to life beyond work and what “career culmination” would entail. I knew I was not yet ready to give up the academic life, yet I also knew that, despite the absence of a mandatory retirement age, I had reached the point at which I should take seriously a future in retirement — to professionals in the field, I had become a “transitioner.”

Turning 65 also coincided with my interest in using blogs as tools for teaching. Partly to model a web presence for a class of students, partly to evaluate the value in blogging, I set up “The Retiring Professor” to record my passage out of work and into retirement. My angst is apparent in early entries; my questions seemed endless. For a historian attuned to the social construction of the stages of life, someone who had built a career researching and writing about the identities adults create for children, I found I knew very little about the identity associated with retirement, or how it was constructed. For sure I’d given little thought to designing a retirement identity for myself.

Intuitively I subtitled my blog “transitioning” to retirement, perhaps to postpone the identity project. Only later did I become aware of the significance of the subtitle I adopted. Retiring is, indeed, a journey, not a calendar date. I’ve found it to be a process that involves preparation on many levels and one that could be made less painful if university policies were easily accessible.

For transitioning through different academic levels, from tenure to full professor, policies are publicized and mentoring workshops are taught by those who have gone through the process. In contrast, identifying information about how to provide my department chair with a formal announcement of the date for my retirement required some determined sleuthing, since even the faculty handbook at my university, Virginia Tech, does not contain a section dedicated to the process of retiring.

Sleuthing eventually led me to the university’s office of human relations, where HR professionals support workshops and web pages about retirement. The workshops emphasize financial planning and aim to address the savings concerns of younger employees. Only the workshop on “emotional readiness” is directed toward those of us thinking about retirement in the immediate future.

“Retirees Corner,” the retirement website of my university’s HR office, offers links to advice on Medicare and a video about Social Security. And it lists the amenities I’ll be entitled to as a retired employee. I am glad to know that I will have free parking, can continue to use my .edu email address, and will have library privileges; I am saddened there is no mention of office space, library carrels, or even a campus lounge for former employees.
More to the point, Retirees Corner does not address the transitioner’s need for information about policies and procedures. Nor does Retirees Corner give transitioners a place for virtual interaction with HR staff or a space to engage virtually with other transitioners. To address this transitioner’s myriad concerns, I would have found useful something as simple as a virtual bibliography of recommended readings and websites.

If information accessibility has been one source of frustration for The Retiring Professor, a second has been my heightened awareness of the cultural meanings of retirement and the attitudes that shape interactions between generations. Often I experience these attitudes as condescension, a benign but emotionally painful discrimination that marginalizes faculty of a certain age.

I see it in the HR workshop leaders who tell us what our experiences should be. This approach leaves me wondering why a workshop on “emotional readiness” is not led by someone for whom finding emotional readiness was once a quest. I see it in published columns about the future of the discipline where the unemployment of young scholars is linked to the failure of seasoned scholars to retire. I see it in the subtle use of infantilizing language — “Retirees Corner” for example. Are the readers consulting this page about to be punished, or simply pushed out of the way? I see it, too, in a widespread tendency to conflate retirement and the infirmity that often accompanies “old age.”

The process of aging and the path to retirement may coincide, but they require different accommodations and hinge on different public and private identities. My career may be culminating, but my life — not yet.

One solution to condescension could well be a policy of flexible or “phased” retirement. If my university offers such an option, it is not publicized. Lacking an official option, I found myself designing an ad hoc five-year plan. Creating and maintaining the blog was certainly a part of my design for a phased retirement. As I wrote about my concerns and my research to address financing, knowing when to go, making the decision public, and coping throughout with the social construction of retirement, I was also announcing the intention to retire.

As I blogged, I also made decisions to scale back on teaching new courses, to ignore myriad university funding opportunities for new projects, to downsize my office library, to take on only the work that gave me pleasure, and to avoid discussions about the future of the department. Phasing was right for me; it has made retirement at the end of this academic year, after five years of transitioning, a step I no longer approach with trepidation.

And yet, the decision to phase into retirement is one I fear my junior colleagues do not view with such equanimity. What I see as a way to address energy limits while I do the emotional work that should precede retirement they may perceive as a lack of interest and lowered productivity. Without a university acknowledgement that faculty members need to let go in stages, my colleagues are not able to both include transitioners and find ways to support the process of retiring.

The problems I’ve encountered while transitioning to retirement have been both cultural and structural. I have drawn a very personal map to help me navigate the journey; other professors will do likewise. The process could be simplified, the road made less bumpy, if universities acknowledge that culminating a career can be as difficult as starting one.

Kathleen W. Jones is an associate professor and director of graduate studies in the department of history at Virginia Tech University.

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Professors Are Graying and Staying, Creating a Faculty Bottleneck

At some universities, 1 in 3 academics are now 60 or older

By AUDREY WILLIAMS JUNE

When Mary Beth Norton went to work at Cornell University in 1971, she was the history department’s first female hire. But now the accomplished professor has a different mark of distinction: She is the oldest American-history scholar at Cornell. “I’ve always thought of myself as the sweet young thing in the department,” Ms. Norton, who will turn 69 this month, says with a laugh. “But that’s not true anymore.”

At elite research universities, where longtime professors enjoy freedom and resources, many don’t see the need to retire. The number of faculty members ages 65 and up more than doubled from 2000 to 2011.
A growing proportion of the nation’s professors are at the same point in their careers as Ms. Norton: still working, but with the end of their careers in sight. Their tendency to remain on the job as long as their work is enjoyable — or, during economic downturns, long enough to make sure they have enough money to live on in retirement — has led the professoriate to a crucial juncture.

Amid an aging American work force, thegraying of college faculties is particularly notable. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of professors ages 65 and up has more than doubled between 2000 and 2011. At some institutions, including Cornell, more than one in three tenured or tenure-track professors are now 60 or older. At many others — including Duke and George Mason Universities and the Universities of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Texas at Austin, and Virginia — at least one in four are 60 or older. (See chart on the following page.)

Colleges have been talking about an impending mass exodus of baby-boomer professors for at least the past decade, but it hasn’t occurred yet because people in their 60s, in particular, aren’t ready to retire. But even with the preponderance of older faculty in academe, experts say that widespread retirements aren’t imminent, but instead will most likely take place in spurts over the next 10 years or so as more professors reach age 70.

In the meantime, the challenges of an aging work force are especially salient for colleges. Faculty can retire at will (a perk that began with the end of mandatory retirement in 1994), and young Ph.D.’s are waiting in the wings for jobs. Institutions are also struggling to manage faculty renewal at a time when the position left behind by a retired faculty member might be lost to budget cuts.

Older professors understand what’s at stake. But at the same time, they have managed to craft professional and personal lives that they’re not ready to walk away from. And some administrators, who are themselves often in the same age bracket as the faculty in question, can relate. Yet their task of preparing for the next generation, while managing the faculty in question, can relate. Yet their task of preparing for the next generation, while managing the faculty in question, can relate. Yet their task of preparing for the next generation, while managing the faculty in question, can relate. Yet their task of preparing for the next generation, while managing the faculty in question.

A department top-heavy with older professors is playing out similarly at all types of colleges across the nation. The problem is more pronounced at some places, particularly at elite research institutions like Cornell, where senior professors often have particular freedom to shape their academic pursuits to fit their interests. At other kinds of institutions where the workload isn’t as flexible, studies have shown, faculty members are more inclined to retire.

At Cornell, the percentage of professors in their 70s and beyond has doubled since 2000; they now make up 6 percent of the university’s 1,500-member faculty. Other places with a sizable percentage of faculty members in their 70s and older include Claremont McKenna College and the University of Texas at Austin, both of which have 7 percent of their faculty in that age group, and the University of Florida, with 6 percent.

The issue of aging faculty is complex, in part because of the nature of academic work. The faces behind the numbers, like Ralph M. Stein of Pace University, are lifelong academics who have often crafted careers at a single institution whose reputation they have helped to build. Their work isn’t just a way to earn a living, but instead a major part of their identity. And that can make it difficult for professors to give up their jobs.

Mr. Stein, a founding member of the law school at Pace, is 68 and teaches eight courses each year. “As long as I can do the job, I’m going to keep doing it,” he says. “If a person is still performing very well, I don’t see why people should suggest that there’s a moral or other obligation to let somebody else come in.”

In fact, Mr. Stein adds, “Everybody who knows me knows I’m going out of here feet first.”

For Peter J. Lang, an 81-year-old graduate research professor at the University of Florida, retirement would mean leaving behind the behavior-therapy research he has conducted over a career that has spanned three universities. “Right now I’m at a really exciting place in my research,” says Mr. Lang, who has been employed at Florida for 30 years. “I’d like to hang in and see where it goes.”

AN EXPENSIVE BOTTLENECK

But on the departmental level, who stays and who goes dictates the game plan for a department’s future. A department top-heavy with older faculty members most likely means that new hires, who often bring with them new fields of study and new course ideas, will be few and far between until more retirements occur.

Susan S. Meyer is chair of a philosophy department in transition at the University of Pennsylvania. Half of the department’s 14 professors are nearly 60, or above, and the other half are 50 or under. One professor, who is participating in a phased-retirement plan, will leave at the end of this year. Another person, of retirement age, left for another university. The 60-and-above cohort in the department will shrink in the wake of the departures, and Ms. Meyer, 51, is hopeful that new hires will help the other end of the age spectrum grow.

“What we’ve got with no mandatory retirement is kind of a bottleneck at the most-expensive end at a lot of places,” says Ms. Meyer, who is on sabbatical. “For department chairs that means there’s an inability to renew the ranks. Our own graduate students are going off and there are fewer opportunities for them.”
The philosophy department at Cornell has a standing committee that “keeps an eye on” young scholars the institution may want to recruit “if the right occasion unfolds,” says Scott MacDonald, department chair. “We’re small enough that we continually, and without reflection, know what the demographics are in the department.”

He expects at least three professors to begin phased retirement in the next three years. In a department of 16 professors, Mr. MacDonald says, there is “a lump of 55- to 70-year-olds, a lump of early-career faculty, and we’re a little bit low in the middle.”

Meanwhile, young Ph.D.’s lament that retirements aren’t happening quickly enough. One poster on The Chronicle’s forums recently wondered when the tight academic job market would turn around.

“A part of me thinks that we’re just waiting for the baby boomers to retire,” the poster wrote. “I wonder how much of the difficult job market right now is a result of these people holding onto their jobs.”

Indeed, in an expanding job market, the effect of legions of longtime professors still on the job “might not be as acute,” says Peter Conn, a professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania and a Chronicle contributor, who has written about aging faculty and their effect on the job prospects of young scholars in the humanities. He is also a former dean of Penn’s College of Arts and Sciences, where 7.3 percent of the tenured faculty was over 70 in 2010. “But in a shrinking market it seems to me to be obvious that new or younger colleagues looking for work are going to suffer,” Mr. Conn says.

But why quit, some professors say, when they have all the intellectual stimulation, work-life flexibility, and camaraderie they need on the job?

**PRODUCTIVE, OR NOT?**

At the core of conversations about older faculty members is the perennial question: Are they productive? The answer is: It depends. When professors have been around for decades, it’s easy enough for them to simply maintain the status quo, refusing to freshen up tired lectures, shunning new

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Proportion of Faculty 60 and Older Has Grown at Colleges Across the Country

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Note: Data generally include full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty only. Some institutions exclude medical and nursing faculty. The years are the most recent available.

Sources: University reports
Deciding to Retire: ‘I Wanted to Get Out While I Was on Top’

When James B. Maas arrived at Cornell University as a graduate student in 1964, little did he know that he would be at the institution for nearly half a century.

When he retired on the last day of December 2011, Mr. Maas had taught Psychology 1101: Introduction to Psychology to more than 65,000 students. It took Mr. Maas almost a decade to decide to leave. Until the end, he kept honing his lectures and sought to embrace new technology to better convey concepts to his students.

“I have had so many students tell me that my course changed their life,” says Mr. Maas, 73, a professor of psychology who is known as a pioneer in sleep research.

Mr. Maas’s first exposure to what would become his most popular course was as a teaching assistant filling in for a professor who left abruptly to take another academic job. The psychology department at Cornell asked him to teach the class for a year while he finished his Ph.D.

At age 65, Mr. Maas says, he began thinking about when he should retire. But then he learned that Cornell was going to renovate the concert hall in which he taught and he couldn’t bear to leave without having the chance to work in the new facility. When the hall was complete, Mr. Maas was 68. “I had to try it without having the chance to work in the new facility. When the hall was complete, Mr. Maas was 68. “I had to try it for a year,” he says, “and then, before I knew it, I was 73.”

His course, which started out with about 400 students, quickly grew to about 1,500 as students learned of Mr. Maas’s penchant for using audiovisual material to bring his lessons to life. Even with the help of 35 teaching assistants and tutors, it was a labor-intensive course. Mr. Maas answered nearly 100 e-mails a day from students and would often write as many as 200 letters of recommendation for students each year. Despite having taught the course for decades, Mr. Maas also prepared or revised his lectures every night.

“Even though a lot of basic psychology doesn’t change that much, for me to be excited about the material and teach it well, I had to do that,” he said. Mr. Maas says he missed just one class in 48 years, due to a bout of laryngitis.

In the years leading up to his retirement, it became harder for Mr. Maas not to crumble under his workload. He was scheduled to take a sabbatical in the spring of 2012, but that would have obligated him to teach another academic year. “I wanted to get out while I was on top,” he says.

In the end, the key driver in his decision to retire was his wife, Nancy, a professional artist with a doctoral degree in art history. She wanted to put Ithaca’s harsh winters behind her and pursue work in a larger city with a flourishing art community. The couple have traveled to Arizona and Florida in an attempt to find the right locale for their new home. After 32 years of marriage, Mr. Maas says, it was time for him to make his wife’s career a priority.

“She sacrificed her career so that I could spend that kind of time on mine,” says Mr. Maas.

In the fall, Psychology 1101: Introduction to Psychology will be held again, with a new professor at the helm for the first time in nearly 50 years.

— AUDREY WILLIAMS JUNE

scholarship, and barely bothering to take on departmental duties. But clearly age doesn’t dictate levels of productivity. A young assistant professor can fall short of the mark, as well, by not cranking out enough research to attain tenure or never quite connecting with students in the classroom.

“Despite mythology to the contrary, there’s very little evidence that older faculty become less productive,” says Mr. Conn, who is 69. Faculty at top research universities, in particular, are “if anything, more productive,” he adds, as tenure and rich resources work together in their favor.

When it comes to teaching, Ms. Meyer maintains that some of Penn’s oldest teachers are among its best, mainly because they are more experienced. Still, “if someone’s no longer able to do the work, that’s a difficult conversation to have.”

Department leaders also have to be cognizant of evening out work in departments, particularly in those with large numbers of older faculty. One of the perks of the job for longtime faculty members has often been the ability to pick and choose how much departmental work to take on, but that’s not always possible.

“As people don’t retire, but they’re still full-time members of the department, you just can’t have more and more of the work falling onto fewer and fewer people,” says Ms. Meyer, who has been at Penn since 1994. “Unless they have declared a retirement, you have to insist that they do their fair share of work.”

G. Howard Miller considers himself an example of how older faculty members can thrive when they work to reinvent themselves.

As Mr. Miller, an associate professor of history, neared the end of his almost 40-year career at the University of Texas at Austin, he says he began to keenly feel the age gap between him and his students. When he first arrived at the institution, in 1971, the commonalities between him and the students he taught were many, including that they were mostly native Texans who shared his South-
ern drawl. He also was not that much older than his most-senior students.

But as time passed, Texas’s flagship campus grew into a nationally known research institution, and most of Mr. Miller’s students started to come from outside Texas. And as he aged, a deeper disconnect grew. “The kinds of things I could assume that they knew about, the part of history that we had lived through, was not the same,” he said. “Especially with the growth of technology, that gap got to be a little formidable.”

Mr. Miller decided that he needed to scrap his standard lectures for his classes on the history of religion in America and instead begin to “speak the technical language that my students did.” In the years before his retirement, which was at the end of the last academic year, he revamped his teaching style, which included turning one of his signature courses, “Jesus in American Culture,” into a multimedia offering. It featured a video, music and audio recordings, and online lectures. Before he knew it, Mr. Miller says, the course drew attention from his peers, who nominated him for teaching awards that he ultimately won.

“I had to learn about using films and images and music and stop being a lecture-oriented professor,” says Mr. Miller, who is now 70. “I carved out an entirely different type of reputation for myself at the university, and I was really rewarded for that. But if I had retired earlier, none of that would have happened.”

TOUGH TALKS

Mr. Miller, who said recent health problems had made it harder for him to get around campus, initiated talks with his department chair about his timetable for retiring. But not all professors raise the issue, and it’s a dicey proposition for administrators to broach the subject with faculty.

“As an administrator I’m dealing with two conflicting messages,” says Ralph J. Blasting, dean of liberal arts at Siena College. “The first is to plan three to five years out, and the second is to never use the ‘r-word’ with a faculty member because of perceptions of ageism and discrimination.”

So administrators trying to make plans for new hires are often working only with age data and supposition.

“We can look at a department and we can determine who is close to retirement age, but that doesn’t tell you much,” Mr. Blasting says. “Someone 60 might want to work until they’re 65 or work until they’re 90.”

But administrators have found some ways to plan. Mr. Blasting says the posttenure reviews he conducts every three years of his college’s faculty have helped him get a better handle on when some professors might choose to retire. As faculty members discuss their goals for the next three years, it’s not uncommon for someone to mention that the next time he or she meets with him, the person will probably want to talk about retirement.

“It just sets the stage for people to talk about their job and what they want to do in a way that’s really helpful,” Mr. Blasting says.

Institutions also rely on phased-retirement programs to help them fine-tune planning. Such programs typically offer professors a prorated salary as they scale back their duties, while maintaining a full retirement and health benefits. In return, professors must give administrators a specific retirement date up to three years in the future. Some institutions, like Cornell, allow professors to retire over a five-year period.

But experts on faculty-retirement patterns say that, even as institutions are doing more to work with faculty on financial planning, not enough are paying attention to the psychological effects of retirement and how to guide professors through the uncertainty about what their lives might be like after academe.

“Lots of places have an HR focus about retirement for faculty, like how to get your financing in order,” says David Stein, an associate professor of work-force development and education at Ohio State, who has done research on aging faculty.

“But they don’t tend to get beyond that to, What am I going to do next? What does it mean to not be a faculty member? Some people have real issues with that.”

GOOD TIMING

Sometimes, retirement is all about timing. Lorraine Dorfman, a retired professor of social work at the University of Iowa, had contemplated entering phased retirement in 2001, right after her husband died. But after thinking about it for six months, she decided to wait. “I didn’t want two big transitions,” Ms. Dorfman says.

Eventually, Ms. Dorfman, who has done extensive research on retired professors, says she got to the point where she believed it was time to pass the baton. She retired in 2010 at age 74.

“Fields change, and most of us realize that there is a new crop of people who have been trained differently with new ideas and they deserve to be heard,” Ms. Dorfman says.

Like many professors, she has continued to work in her field, including serving on dissertation committees and reviewing journal articles. But she is also enjoying the personal benefits of retirement. She had the time, for example, to take her teenage grandson on a trip to China last summer.

Elizabeth D. Earle is winding down her career the way she planned, too. A professor in Cornell’s department of plant breeding and genetics, she is in her fifth and final year of phased retirement. The 74-year-old says she chose that path so she
could begin to shed aspects of her work she was losing interest in, while still doing others where she felt she continued to shine.

A few years into her phased retirement, she closed down her lab, saying she had grown tired of competing for grants to support her research and the people who helped her do it. But she continues to teach. She has taught courses on genetically engineered crops, plant cell and tissue culture, and has made trips to West Africa to teach at a center for plant improvement there.

Ms. Earle, whose department has faculty who are mostly in their 50s and 60s, says she may have retired earlier if there had not been a phased-retirement program and she thought her leaving might benefit her program in some way.

That kind of sentiment illustrates how carefully many professors weigh what impact their retirement might have on their colleagues. It is not uncommon for faculty members to stay put as they try to get a better sense of what will happen to their position, and their research areas, once they're gone.

“The retiring professor does care very much about the department and wants to be sure that their line is going to be renewed,” Mr. Blasting says. “And not only that, but that the line will be renewed with their particular specialty.”

David A. Hammer, a professor of nuclear engineering and electrical and computer engineering at Cornell, doesn’t yet see the signs of that kind of renewal in his department. He and three other professors are the only four faculty members who work in his area, says Mr. Hammer, who has been at Cornell since 1977. Talk about new hires seems

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**Staying On: ‘Why Quit Now?’**

**Joe Regenstein, a food scientist at Cornell (shown here in a campus kitchen), travels around the world sharing his expertise in kosher and halal regulations.**

At a time when some of Joe M. Regenstein’s peers are thinking about retiring, the professor of food science at Cornell University is adjusting to life in the spotlight.

His expertise in kosher and halal food regulations continues to draw global interest. In February he was invited to speak in Saudi Arabia at the first international conference on halal food control. And, back in Ithaca, his “Kosher and Halal Food Regulations” course has become so popular that enrollment is now capped at 200.

“My career is moving along, and it’s more and more exciting,” says Mr. Regenstein, 68. “Why quit now?”

Mr. Regenstein came to Cornell in 1974, straight out of graduate school at Brandeis University. He’s noticed how gray the faculty is in his department, but he and his colleagues don’t talk specifics about their retirement plans. One professor has made it clear he “plans to go out on a journey,” Mr. Regenstein says. For him, a more appealing option would be phased retirement. Cornell allows professors to work half time, for half the pay, for up to five years before they have to officially end their careers at the institution.

“At some point I would look at that,” says Mr. Regenstein, who would like to continue teaching his kosher-and-halal course even in retirement. His wife has already retired as the associate vice provost for computer services at Carnegie Mellon University, but Mr. Regenstein says she “recognizes that I’m not going to.”

Although Mr. Regenstein hasn’t reconciled how he’ll end his career at Cornell, he’s certain that his exit will mark the end of an era in the university’s commitment to meat science, and that makes it harder to leave.

“At one point you had four people working in this arena; now I’m the last man standing,” says Mr. Regenstein, who heads the Cornell Kosher Food Initiative. “It’s pretty clear that I won’t be replaced.”

Besides his kosher-and-halal course, Mr. Regenstein also teaches other courses, among them: “Introduction to Animal Welfare,” “Chef’s Chemistry,” “Environmental Stewardship in the Cornell Community,” and “Food Law,” an independent-study course. And he’s an adjunct professor at Kansas State University, where his kosher-and-halal course is available online.

Next fall he plans to teach a new course, “A Good Meal: A Window Into Diversity,” that he developed. It’s slated to be held in a community center near the university’s freshman residence halls and will feature lectures on food and culture. The dining hall will serve food related to the topic, and students in the class will eat as a group.

“That’s why it’s hard to think about retiring,” Mr. Regenstein says. “I just keep thinking of things I want to do.”

— AUDREY WILLIAMS JUNE
to center around landing professors who don’t have the same specialty that soon-to-retire senior scholars do, Mr. Hammer says.

“Unless the word ‘renewal’ is used more forcefully, none of the four of us will be replaced,” says Mr. Hammer, 68, who is now teaching a course on controlled fusion and an energy seminar. An obvious time for him to retire, he says, would be when his graduate students have all earned their doctorate degrees. “I’m pretty healthy, so I don’t need to retire because of my health,” says Mr. Hammer, whose wife is a longtime professor in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell. “And my wife isn’t pounding on the table every evening saying, ‘When are we going to retire?’”

Cornell officials aren’t mounting a widespread push for retirements to happen either. G. Peter Lepage, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the institution, says demographics will ultimately do the trick.

CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS

Four years ago, Mr. Lepage examined the age distribution of the college’s 500 faculty members. The theoretical physicist crunched the numbers back to 1983 and found that the faculty of Cornell’s largest college was steadily aging. In 1983, 5 percent of the faculty was 65 and older, compared with 20 percent in 2011. The explanation, he says, is a simple one: A critical mass of faculty members hired in the 1970s had aged in place.

“Most of our faculty stay here, so what we have is a big lump of faculty members that have just been marching through our system,” Mr. Lepage says.

Now the pace of retirements, he says, is gradually picking up. About 15 people retire each year in his college, he says, roughly double the annual rate of retirements in the late 1980s. Each year about a dozen more professors leave for other reasons.

Mr. Lepage’s data were at the crux of a 2010 decision by the university’s Board of Trustees to commit $100-million to hire new professors universitywide over the next decade. The plan, which donors will help finance, will allow young faculty members to establish themselves before the senior scholars they’re replacing retire.

“We’re basically hiring our reputation for the next 20 or 30 years,” Mr. Lepage says. The college has begun to “pre-fill” jobs, hiring young professors to take the place of senior professors who are expected to retire with the next decade. The College of Arts and Sciences needs to hire about 28 professors each year to replace faculty who leave. Last year, partly because of its pre-filling efforts, the college hired 35 professors.

Hiring new faculty in advance of retirements comes with obvious risks, but Cornell is constantly securing and setting aside “bridge funds” to cover the cost of hires that may overlap for as many as five years.

Ms. Norton, Cornell’s oldest American-history professor, is one of the faculty members who has no immediate plans to retire. She still enjoys teaching. In fact, a popular new course that she teaches with the principal investigator of the Mars Exploration Rover Mission, who is also a Cornell professor, has basically pushed thoughts of retirement off her radar.

“It’s a very exciting class to teach,” Ms. Norton says of the course, “History of Exploration: Land, Sea, Space.” “I hate to give it up by retiring.”

For now, Ms. Norton plans to teach through the next academic year. After that, “I’m leaving my options open,” she says. “I’ll likely retire sooner rather than later, but I haven’t decided anything.”

Originally published on March 18, 2012
Albert Einstein was an ageist. The journal *Nature* once quoted the physicist saying, “A person who has not yet made his great contribution to science by the age of 30 will never do so.” His Nobel Prize was for work he did during his 20s.

But if the Nobel is the barometer of greatness, greatness is getting older. A recent analysis of Nobelists in physics, chemistry, and medicine showed that before 1905, their prizeworthy work was done around age 36. But after 1985, the good stuff was done between ages 45 and 50 for all three fields.

“You’re unlikely to make breakthroughs in your 20s anymore,” said Benjamin F. Jones, an associate professor at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management and a co-author of the analysis. “The high period of creativity has been moved later in the career.”

The change extends well beyond people with an invitation to Stockholm, into the general professoriate. The production of papers, and in many cases their impact, remains high through age 70. Why? As academic fields have grown, it takes professors more time to piece together knowledge into something meaningful. Some researchers argue that the end of mandatory retirement in 1994 has given more professors reasons to work hard later in their careers. Also, people are living longer and healthier lives.

And finally, there’s a social aspect. Research is more collaborative, and the variety “helps revive and sustain the creativity of the older members of the group,” Dean K. Simonton, a professor of psychology at the University of California at Davis, wrote in an e-mail. (While most of this re-
search has been done on scientists, work on painters and novelists — who are not necessarily academics — shows a similar shift toward later career achievement.

There are still factors that can drag an older professor's performance down, however. An institution that shoves one to the side as retirement approaches is the chief culprit. "If you lose access to a lab at age 60, 65, or 70, it’s not going to help you out any if you do lab research," Mr. Simonton noted.

Bruce A. Weinberg, an associate professor of economics at Ohio State University and the other author of the Nobel analysis — which was published in the November 7 issue of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences — says it’s certainly possible to find examples of older faculty who “are dried up.” But, he says, "you can find a lot who are vibrant and doing a lot."

That was clear in one of the largest studies of age and productivity, when researchers in 2008 looked at more than 6,000 professors from the sciences and the humanities at several universities in Quebec, Canada. The average annual number of published papers started at about 1.5 around age 30, peaked at just over 3 at age 50, and stayed that high through age 70.

The number of citations for these papers, a way to measure their impact in their fields, actually rose from age 40 to age 70. Another study, of several hundred faculty in the University of California system who were eligible for early retirement in the 1990s, found that people who did not take the offer did not tail off on their publications, either.

The end of mandatory retirement may explain a lot of this continuing activity, writes Wolfgang Stroebe, a professor of social and organizational psychology at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. In a 2010 paper in American Psychologist entitled “The Graying of Academia,” he pointed out that forcing people to retire at a particular age robbed them of motivation to continue to work hard. They would accrue no benefits from continued peer recognition, he said: no grants, no awards, no lab space, nothing of academic value. But letting 65-year-olds continue to work changes the game, he said.

Mr. Stroebe also noted that older professors seem to be up to the task cognitively. There is evidence of age-related mental decline on isolated psychological tests, but no evidence of overall deficits in IQ. A style of independent thought called “divergent thinking,” which is often associated with creativity, does not show much variance with age. Mr. Simonton added that “stigmas associated with being ‘over the hill’ have lessened, and ... even the ‘senior moment’ has become more of a self-deprecating joke."

But the stereotype persists, and that’s a source of worry even for Mr. Simonton, an expert in the psychology of scientific achievement. He points out that his first publication on this topic was in 1975, and now at age 64 he frets: “Will the editors still love me, will they still need me?”

Originally published on March 18, 2012

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**Older and More Prized**

The average age at which Nobel Prize winners in three fields did their prizeworthy work increased markedly during the 20th century.

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Note: Ages are rounded. Source: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences
Faculty members can work as long as they want, a right that began with the end of mandatory retirement in 1994. Many haven’t been shy about exercising that right, and the American professoriate is decidedly grayer than it was a generation ago.

This creates complications for colleges, including by limiting their flexibility in making decisions about budgets and about academic programming. It also exacerbates job-market pressures for some new Ph.D.s who see a glut of aging scholars contributing to the dearth of job openings. All this was on the minds of Widener University administrators when they conceived of a new option they’d like to begin offering soon: the terminal sabbatical.

The idea is to allow eligible faculty members — based on years of service — to take a one-year sabbatical from which they would then retire, without returning to the faculty. Julie E. Wollman, Widener’s president, says she hopes such a program would encourage more professors to retire by easing their transition out of campus life. That, in turn, would free up money in the budget.

One Idea to Ease Faculty Into Retirement: the ‘Terminal Sabbatical’

By VIMAL PATEL
and allow administrators to more nimbly shift money to emerging priorities.

Administrators are just beginning to sketch out the specifics of their idea, and to pitch it to faculty, but they envision that a professor who takes a terminal sabbatical would continue to receive a salary and benefits for one year while doing the kind of work one would do on a typical sabbatical, like research and writing. The sabbatical might also include some form of service to the university, like performing an analysis of a proposed program or helping to revamp curricula.

Offering a structured sabbatical program at the end of a professor's academic career is unusual, says Janette C. Brown, executive director of the Association of Retirement Organizations in Higher Education. Many colleges, though, are paying more attention to easing tenured faculty members' transition into retirement. Phased retirements, in which professors work progressively fewer hours for one or more years, are common.

The University of Southern California, where Ms. Brown is assistant vice provost of the Emeriti Center, hired a faculty retirement “navigator” two years ago to serve as a confidential advocate and resource for faculty members who are retiring or considering retirement. Ms. Brown's center tries to keep retired faculty members engaged with their university by promoting part-time or volunteer work on the campus and encouraging retirees to be part of a living-history project.

A goal of Widener’s is to reduce the psychological toll of retirement by creating a yearlong transition period.

“Faculty are fearful of losing their identity,” Ms. Brown says. “Institutions need to look at things differently so that retirement is not like stepping off the edge of a cliff. Colleges are not quite getting that yet, but they’re slowly beginning to come around.”

HOW TO AVOID DISTRUST

At Widener, administrators say they want to bring more openness to the process of retiring. Retirement incentives tend to breed distrust, with professors suspecting that a colleague is getting a better deal. And the lack of clear information can make people wonder whether they should hold out until an incentive like a buyout program comes along.

In fact, Widener administrators and faculty-retirement experts say the increasing availability of retirement incentives, including buyouts, has led to an unintended consequence: Faculty members now expect them and linger on to avoid missing one that may be just around the corner. Ms. Wollman says adopting a defined program, like the terminal-sabbatical idea, that is available to all eligible faculty members would make the process more transparent.

“We want to continue to incentivize retirement,” Ms. Wollman says, “but we don’t want this kind of ad hoc process that begins to seem inequitable because it’s only in certain areas and some people get more than others.”

Widener recently offered buyouts to selected groups of faculty, most in law and business. Administrators say the buyout programs, in which faculty members were given a year or more of salary in exchange for retiring, show that faculty do respond to retirement incentives. In all, about 50 professors took the offers during programs this year and in 2013, a significant chunk of the faculty. Widener now has 235 tenured or tenure-track faculty members.

Sometimes the goal of the buyouts is downsizing, while other times it’s creating flexibility in the budget. At the law school, Widener wanted to cut costs amid shrinking enrollments, a nationwide trend at law schools; Widener’s dropped 37 percent from the fall of 2012 to the fall of 2015, when the school enrolled about 800 full-time-equivalent students. At the business school, the goal of the buyouts was to shift direction by using the money saved on retiring professors to hire new faculty in in-demand areas like finance, which saw an increase in undergraduate majors.

“The evidence from our university and others,” Ms. Wollman says, “is that these things really do work.”

MAKING RETIREMENT ATTRACTIVE

Not all retirement incentives are created equal. And it remains to be seen whether terminal sabbaticals — which wouldn’t come with a year of salary for no work like a buyout does but rather a year’s salary in exchange for working on a project — would have the same appeal to professors.
Three years ago, when he was 64, Michael J. Goldberg, a Widener law professor, could have taken a buyout but didn’t, because he felt had a few good years of faculty service ahead of him. He also wasn’t old enough to qualify for university health insurance for retirees. This year, for two full years of his salary, he took the offer. “I wasn’t dying to leave the work and I’m still good at it, I’d like to think,” Mr. Goldberg says. “I don’t know whether one year would have been enough of an incentive.”

Mr. Goldberg says he also would have considered taking a terminal sabbatical for one year of his salary. “It certainly would have been attractive,” he says. “I don’t know what I would have done.”

But administrators recognize that there are many others, like David Ward, a 67-year-old Widener philosophy professor who has no intention of retiring, who won’t be swayed by a terminal sabbatical or any other incentive. Mr. Ward says he enjoys his work too much to quit. “I get paid for reading interesting books and talking about interesting topics,” he says. “Why would I quit that?”

Even so, he’s a supporter of terminal sabbaticals. He knows faculty members who no longer share his passion for the work, and who might be better off doing something else but hang on for the security of a paycheck.

“There are professors who burn out, get frustrated at the quality of students, or just lose interest,” Mr. Ward says. “The students aren’t getting the best, the discipline isn’t getting the best, and the faculty member isn’t having any fun. In those cases, retirement incentives are a win for everyone.”

At least one faculty member is already intrigued by the idea of a terminal sabbatical. Raymond Jefferis has been a Widener engineering professor for more than half a century. He didn’t waste time thinking up a proposal for his terminal sabbatical: writing a book on mechatronics, which is the intersection of mechanical engineering and electronics.

Mr. Jefferis, 78, loves creating things, whether it’s devising a mechatronics course or inventing a metal detector for archaeological work. He has owned an electronics manufacturing company for 22 years, Mr. Jefferis says, so he doesn’t need to keep working for the money. He would prefer taking a terminal sabbatical to ease him into post-academic life rather than taking two years of his salary as a buyout.

“If it weren’t for a program like this,” Mr. Jefferis says, “I would probably keep going till I dropped dead in class.”

*Originally published on July 26, 2016*
Ask Debra Leigh Scott how she plans to make ends meet after her teaching career is over, and her answer is direct. “Suicide,” she says, “is my retirement plan.”

Of course, she doesn’t want to kill herself. But there might come a time, she says, when ending her life would be the only “dignified” escape from the indignities of growing old with no safety net.

Scott, an artist who just turned 60, is an adjunct professor teaching in Temple University’s intellectual-heritage program. She’s a member of the first generation of a relatively new breed of adjunct: the teacher who wanted to become a full-time professor but never got the opportunity. A divorced mother of two grown children, she has now been teaching for over 25 years, cobbling together different types of jobs to scrape by. She got beaten down by the recession, lost several jobs and her home, and she’s used what little savings she had to stay afloat.

Though she knows how to “bend a nickel in five directions,” Scott hasn’t been able to put any money aside for retirement. Her decision to pursue an academic career has required that she live as simply and frugally as possible, without the ability to help launch her children into their adult lives.

“I couldn’t help them with tuition. My son has chosen to leave college and is working full time, and my daughter has a six-figure debt that she’ll be paying in her 40s,” Scott says. “So you could say that they’ve already paid for my life choices.”

Scott is just one of an untold number of graying adjunct professors for whom retirement is not a time to look forward to but a thing to fear. Since the recession,

adjuncts are hardly the only ones worrying about retirement. But professors who serve on a temporary or at-will basis can spend a lifetime working with no upward mobility and no ability to amass savings. The retirement-planning structure that benefits tenured professors doesn’t work for adjuncts, they say, and their colleges often leave them on their own when it comes to their post-teaching security.

Over the past few months, I’ve talked with a number of adjuncts in their 60s. Many of them say they don’t know how they will survive if they’re too old to teach, if they get sick, or if their institutions decide not to renew their contracts. Many believe they’ll never be able to retire.

“Unless you have a spouse or partner, you’re looking at dire poverty in old age,” says Scott. “In addition to poverty, you’re looking at getting no additional work because of your age, or you’re looking at dropping dead in the classroom.”

‘ABSOLUTE FEAR’

Still fresh on the minds of many older adjuncts is Margaret Mary Vojtko, the 83-year-old Duquesne University adjunct who collapsed near her home in 2013. Vojtko, who had taught at the university for 25 years, was broke after the university declined to renew her contract.

“To drop dead in front of your home is everyone’s nightmare,” says Maria C. Maisto, president of New Faculty Majority, an organization that supports adjuncts and contingent professors. Vojtko’s story concretized what people have felt could happen to them in the future as they age,” she says. “There’s absolute fear.”

The adjunct professor, she says, has come to represent “a lost generation of
faculty” who have been stuck in their positions for years. “More elderly folks are outliving their families, and they don’t have retirement savings to fall back on,” she says. “It's a story about aging, poverty, and loneliness in America.”

Betsy Smith, a 68-year-old adjunct who has been teaching at Cape Cod Community College since 2000, echoes Maisto: “We are going to have a serious problem, an absolute disaster of people living with no heat and no health insurance. We’re going to see more Margaret Mary Vojtkos, and nobody wants to deal with it.”

No one knows how many aging adjuncts are in the danger zone. It’s not hard to find troubling anecdotes about the material realities of contingent professors who are reaching retirement age. But it’s difficult getting hard data from scholars, union leaders, or retirement-planning organizations. No one could tell me how many adjuncts are putting money away for retirement, how their average savings compare to those of full-time faculty or K-12 teachers, or what future trends will look like.

“To date, academic researchers have focused on the retirement of traditional faculty, tenure-track and tenured individuals,” says Paul Yakoboski, a senior economist with the TIAA-CREF Institute. “We don’t have data yet on adjuncts. It’s a gap in our research knowledge that we need to start filling.”

Once upon a time, the National Center for Education Statistics tracked full-time and part-time faculty by age. Its last survey, conducted in the fall of 2003, found that among faculty members between 55 and 64 years old, 40 percent were part-time professors. Increase the age range to 70 and over, though, and 70 percent were part-timers.

More recently, in the fall of 2013, the American Federation of Teachers surveyed 743 part-time faculty members. The majority of the cohort — 57 percent — were over age 50. Sixty-two percent of the respondents said that pension and retirement benefits at their institutions were falling short.

PAYING IN

In recent years, universities have adopted buyouts and phased retirement plans, established retirement centers, and provided office space and other resources to spare faculty retirees from intellectual and social isolation. Conspicuously missing from the discussions and the campus initiatives, though, are contingent faculty.

Many adjuncts, Maisto says, are not entitled to health insurance or 401(k)’s. At some institutions, adjuncts pay into a retirement system for state teachers; at others, they pay into Social Security. Neither option, adjuncts say, is set up to benefit low-wage employees: If you don’t make much money, you can’t invest much, and you don’t get much of a return.

“Unless you are a new Ph.D. working some-

where, now it’s too late to start thinking about saving for retirement,” says Smith. “Who at age 50, working part time, is going to be able to amass enough money to retire on?”

Smith has been teaching grade school through college since 1976, and is enrolled in the state OBRA system, a mandatory, employee-funded retirement contribution plan for part-time public employees who are not eligible for public pensions. In Massachusetts, contingent faculty members teaching at public institutions do not have Social Security taxes removed from their paychecks and are not eligible to receive benefits based on that employment once they retire. Neither the college nor the state contributes to the plan.

“The idea that anyone earning contingent faculty wages could ever afford to retire based on what they’ve saved through this plan is both ludicrous and insulting,” Smith says.

Still, she plans to retire at the end of this semester. She says she’ll be OK because when she divorced her husband of 30 years, the judge granted her modest monthly spousal support as well as a chunk of her ex-husband’s retirement fund. She’ll also qualify for a portion of his Social Security earnings, and she’ll be eligible for her own Social Security payments from previous jobs. But if she had to rely only on her OBRA plan, she says, “I’d be in the same situation as Margaret Mary Vojtko.”

Some public institutions let adjuncts choose whether to contribute to Social Security, the state teacher-retirement system, or a tax-deferred annuity program. Most teacher-retirement plans include a pension, death benefits, and a disability pension that is paid into by the employee. Some universities contribute; others don’t. Anywhere from 3 percent to 10 percent of the instructor’s gross salary is deducted from each paycheck.

The teacher-retirement plans — which are offered at public institutions in states like Ohio, Texas, and Florida — can be a double-edged sword. Unlike with Social Security, adjuncts can withdraw money from those retirement funds when they stop teaching, but they’re taxed for doing so. “Their safety evaporates because they need money to cover their bills,” says Matt Williams, a former adjunct professor at the University of Akron who serves on the board of directors of New Faculty Majority. “Your retirement will be based largely on what your income was when you retired. The benefit level you will get is not going to be enough to live on. It wasn’t enough to live on while you were working, and now you’re getting a fraction of that.”

Mary Gray, a tenured associate professor of mathematics and statistics at American University, puts it even more bluntly: “Part-time faculty are signed up by universities into what amounts to privatized Social Security,” says Gray, who will retire next year.

For professors who piece together a career
One Adjunct’s Retirement Contributions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Pay Period</th>
<th>Gross Earnings</th>
<th>Retirement Contribution</th>
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<tr>
<td>Case Western Reserve</td>
<td>October 2014</td>
<td>$1,050.00</td>
<td>$59.91 to Social Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuyahoga Community College</td>
<td>October-November 2014</td>
<td>$2,232.90</td>
<td>$267.95 to the State Teachers’ Retirement System</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Carroll University</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
<td>$4,050.00</td>
<td>$251.10 to Social Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Akron</td>
<td>April 2013</td>
<td>$1,811.47</td>
<td>$181.15 to the State Teachers’ Retirement System</td>
</tr>
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teaching at several institutions, retirement planning can be especially confusing. Yvonne Bruce is a 49-year-old adjunct professor who has been teaching for 11 years and is already worried about retirement. She teaches English literature and composition at John Carroll University, Cuyahoga Community College, and Case Western Reserve University.

Bruce’s retirement benefits are split among several employers, two private and one public. This year Bruce grossed a little more than $40,000 from teaching 12 courses. (Her salary fluctuates, she says, based on how much institutions pay per course, whether any of her courses get canceled at the last minute, and whether she can snag a summer session.) She provided a sample breakdown of retirement contributions she’s made through four institutions since last year (see table above).

CAN'T RETIRE; HANGING ON

Last August, Bruce attended a session on faculty retirement at a state teacher-retirement information fair in Columbus. “I had questions as an adjunct,” Bruce says. “I wanted to know how contributing to Social Security and the state pension system would affect my retirement income. They didn’t have an answer for me.”

“Most colleges do not provide beginning adjuncts with the kind of orientations common for new full-time employees for whom HR discusses benefits, retirement options, and the like,” she says. (TIAA-CREF just released a report offering a number of recommendations for how institutions can educate adjuncts about their financial options. But the report doesn’t mention that adjuncts might not have money to be managed.)

So why has there been so little progress in improving adjuncts’ retirement outlook?

On the one hand, Gray says, administrators are more engaged with a different retirement issue — trying to figure out ways to get the full-timers to leave the classroom.

On the other hand, adjunct-advocacy groups have focused on other labor concerns.

“I would say that retirement benefits not seeming like a high priority for activists isn’t so much about the benefits actually being of no interest,” says Alyssa Picard, acting director of the American Federation of Teachers’ higher-education wing. “It’s a matter of other, even more urgent priorities crowding out another important but longer-term goal.”

Williams, of New Faculty Majority, agrees.

“The concerns that are faced by adjuncts on a day-to-day are so immediate that they defer the ones that might come 10 to 20 years from now,” he says.

That leaves the current crop of aging adjuncts in a bind. For now, Debra Leigh Scott says, there’s no choice but to “soldier on.”

“We really have all been forced into taking a vow of poverty,” she says. “I don’t intend to give up. I don’t want to give up.”

Originally published on November 25, 2014
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, 2010), 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

We Need to See Retirement as a Hiring Issue

BY CHRISTOPHER PHELPS
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 emeritus status.)

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, volunteering, 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 pro-rated 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.

Christopher Phelps is an associate professor of American intellectual and cultural history at the University of Nottingham.

Original published on April 25, 2010
I cried only once. In April, right after I left a departmental personnel meeting about the search for the new hire who would replace me. At the point where students were scheduled to come in and say what they thought was both good and bad about the drawing and painting program that I headed, I stood up (per an arrangement with my chairman) and recused myself so that the students might speak freely. I gathered my books and folders. Walking down an empty stairwell, I burst into tears.

Five years ago, I signed an “irrevocable agreement” with Hofstra University that paid me a bonus to retire “early.” In my case, that meant at the age of 66. I saw retiring early as an existential embrace of freedom; a last grab to paint my pictures without interruption; to teach maybe, but only occasionally, as a visiting artist; to reread The Magic Mountain; to ponder the starry firmament above and the moral law within.

The Forever Professors

Academics who don’t retire are greedy, selfish, and bad for students

By LAURIE FENDRICH
On commencement day this year, those five years had passed. Recovering my initial passion to leave full-time teaching behind required an almost daily fight to suppress the thought, “This is the last time I will ever do this.” I couldn’t help but hear Dylan singing in my head, “How does it feel / To be without a home / Like a complete unknown / Like a rolling stone?”

Many of my friends, family members, and colleagues think I opted for retirement because I grew tired of teaching. They’re wrong. I love teaching. Conveying what I know, love, and affectionately question — painting and drawing, art, and relevant literature and philosophy (especially to college freshmen, who are too young to pretend, as do juniors and seniors, to be hiply jaded) — is enormously satisfying. Like all professors with a talent for teaching, I’m a bit of a performer. Even after all these years, during my final semester, I still felt a small rush of adrenaline whenever I walked into the classroom, as if I were heading onstage to do stand-up or make an acceptance speech.

After all, how many jobs are there, aside from that of a tenured full professor, where you are almost completely free to do your work your own way, without supervision? In how many jobs is there no way to be fired other than if you stumble off the deep end in some egregious way? How many jobs entail the challenge and excitement of repeatedly being asked to lead a group of young people through the brambles and underbrush and from there on up into the hills of knowledge? In sum, how many jobs offer you a good salary and more than decent benefits to do what you love?

By any measure — course enrollments, teacher evaluations, testimony from students and colleagues, peer observations and evaluations, and even RateMyProfessor.com — I’m a fine teacher, even an exceptional one, though hardly perfect: One student called me, in writing, an “über bitch.” Although I don’t have the energy I had when I was 40, or even 50, compared with most professors in their 60s, I’m an Amazon. I’m also far smarter and cagier about how to teach than when I was a young whippersnapper never more than a couple of steps ahead of my students.

Nevertheless, in June I found myself staring at a stack of Medicare “booklets” (if you can call 120 pages a “booklet”) and surfing various websites, trying to grasp the implications of Medicare Part B. Repeatedly, I was exhorted to “choose the Medicare Part B plan that’s right for you.” The American Association of Retired Persons Medicare handbook, deceptively titled “Hello Simplicity,” is typical: endless paragraphs of incomprehensible blather interspersed with pages of charts bearing an uncanny and discomfiting resemblance to outcomes-assessment rubrics. Had I known that choosing the “plan that’s right” for me would be so laborious, and so expensive, I doubt I would have had the gumption to retire early — or, come to think of it, to retire at all.

The 1994 law ending mandatory retirement at age 70 for university professors substantially mitigated the problem of age discrimination within universities. But out of this law a vexing new problem has emerged — a graying — yea, whitening — professoriate. The law, which allows tenured faculty members to teach as long as they want — well past 70, or until they’re carried out of the classroom on a gurney — means professors are increasingly delaying retirement past age 70 or even choosing not to retire at all.

Like so much else in American life, deciding when to retire from academe has evolved into a strictly private and personal matter, without any guiding rules, ethical context, or sense of obligation to do what’s best — for one’s students, department, or institution. Only the vaguest questions — and sometimes not even those — are legally per-
when to leave prove that they are as self-interest-
ed as any of their countrymen. When professors
continue to teach past 70, they behave in exactly
the same way as when we decide to drive a car on
a national holiday. Who among us stops to connect
the dots between our decision to drive and a traffic
jam, or that traffic jam and global warming?

Despite the boomer claim that
70 is the new 50, and the ac-
tuarial fact that those who live
in industrialized countries and
make it to the age of 65 have a
life expectancy reaching well
into the 80s, 70 remains what
it has always been — old. By the
one measure that should count
for college faculty — how college
students perceive their professors
— it is definitively old. Keep-
ing physically fit, wearing Levi's,
posting pictures on Instagram,
or continually sneaking peeks at
one's iPhone don't count for squat with students,
who, after all, have grandparents who are 70, if not
younger.

To invoke Horace, professors can drive out Na-
ture with a pitchfork, but she'll come right back in.
Aging is Nature's domain, and cannot be kneaded
into a relativist cultural construct. It's her means
of leading us onto the off-ramp of life.

Professors approaching 70 who are still en-
amored with hanging out with students and col-
leagues, or even fretting about money, have an
ethical obligation to step back and think seriously
about quitting. If they do remain on the job, they
should at least openly acknowledge they're doing it
mostly for themselves.

Of course, there are exceptions. Some profes-
sors, especially in the humanities, become more
brilliant as they grow older — coming up with
their best ideas and delivering sagacity to their
students. And some research scientists haul in the
big bucks even when they're old. But those cases
are much rarer than older professors vainly like to
think.

What's far more likely is a version of what I ob-
served in my own department — an art-history
professor in his late 70s who prowled the halls up
until a few years ago. He didn't appear to be able
to use email, and we all knew he was a terribly
easy grader. Even so, he faithfully met his classes
and always attended department meetings, where
he hardly ever said a word. Every time he passed
me in the hall, he'd wag his finger at me and sar-
donically remark, "The only good artist is a dead
artist."

The inconvenient truth is that faculty
who delay retirement harm students, who in
most cases would benefit from being taught
by someone younger than 70, even younger than
65. The salient point is not that younger professors
are better pedagogues (sometimes they are, some-
times they aren't), but that they are more likely to
be current in their fields and to bring that curren-
cy into their teaching.

Younger faculty members are
more likely to be current in
their fields and to bring that
currency into their teaching.

And they delude themselves about their reasons
for hanging on. In the Fidelity survey, 80 percent
of those responding said their primary reason for
wanting to continue as faculty members was not
that they needed the money but for "personal or
professional" reasons. A Fidelity spokesman of-
ered what seemed to me a naïve interpretation of
that answer: "Higher-education employees, espe-
cially faculty, are deeply committed to their stu-
dents, education, and the institutions they serve."

Maybe. But "commitment to higher education"
covers some selfish pleasures.

First, teaching is fun. It offers a sanctioned
"low-level narcissism," as one friend put it, that's
hard to find anywhere else in life other than in
show business. Second, the continual replenish-
ment, each autumn, of fresh-faced 18-year-olds
causes the bulk of the professoriate to feel as if we
are hardly aging at all. Third, because teaching is
part of a life of the mind, by teaching to 70 and be-
yond, professors feel they provide living proof, to
anyone who might question them, that their minds
remain sharp as tacks. Finally, remaining within
the confines of academe past 70 not only protects
professors from the economic and professional un-
certainties of life, but also substantially pumps up
their wealth at the end of their careers.

T

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cy into their teaching.

Septuagenarian faculty members also cost col-
leges more than younger faculty — in the form of higher salaries, higher health-care costs, and higher employer-matched retirement contributions. Even if these costs pale in comparison to paying for bloated administrations, it's wrong to pretend they don't matter.

Worst of all, their presence stifles change. I'm not talking about mindless change for change's sake, but the kind of change necessary to keep an institution thriving. A healthy university consists of departments with a balanced mix of new hires (full of energy, ambition, and fresh ideas), middle-aged faculty members at the height of their productivity, and older faculty with wisdom and a deep understanding of the evolving mission of their departments and universities. Disrupt that balance, and the foundation of an institution's strength is undermined.

On average, graduate students earn their Ph.D.'s at the age of 34, and those landing tenure-track jobs tend to do so in their mid-to-late 30s. Young faculty members aspiring to full-time tenure-track jobs as well as newly minted doctorate holders have a right to be worried, if not resentful, as they watch older faculty clinging to jobs, blocking their chance of entering what remains of the ever-diminishing pool of full-time academic jobs. By delaying retirement, older faculty members, in effect, tell the younger generation of wannabe professors to table their aspirations to teach full time, or maybe even to give them up entirely.

Old professors who refuse to retire hobble an institution's ability to control its academic priorities. Before 1994, every tenure hire had a clearly defined end date; afterward, it became anyone's guess how long a tenured professor would hang around. Administrators must now factor into the total cost of its tenure lines the fact that a significant number of tenured faculty members will end up teaching — at the top salary and benefits level of a full professor, mind you — much longer than they did 20 years ago.

It is not my place to judge, individually, my colleagues and friends who are choosing to teach past 70. I know they have their reasons, almost all of which seem necessary to them. But that doesn't prevent me from judging the way older professors, as a group, are crippling university faculties. Imagine a department of 15 full-time faculty members, five of whom are full professors over 65. If those five delay retirement until they are 73 and the department can't expand, they block new hires for the next eight years. They also dampen the prospects for promotion of faculty members at the associate level, as no dean wants a department overloaded with full professors. Those older full professors also cow junior faculty into an even more "to get along, go along" mentality than the hazing the tenure process already creates.

In the conjoined studio and art-history department that I called home until this past May, the average age is 65, and everyone is tenured or on the tenure track. Half of the full-time faculty are full professors in their 70s; only one of those has publicly announced arrangements to retire — in a couple of years.

My department might be conspicuously old (not to mention top-heavy in terms of rank, lacking both assistant professors and instructors), but it's not that much of an anomaly compared with what's happening at other universities. One-third of the faculty at Cornell is 60 or older. It's more than 25 percent at the University of Virginia, the University of Texas at Austin, Duke University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

One argument offered against professors' retiring before 70 is that their productivity (measured quantitatively by scholarly publications and professional activity) turns out not to decline significantly. Instead, productivity after 70 is associated with professors who are already productive before they reached that age. Unproductive ones? Let's just say a professor doesn't change his spots. There's also the probability of an old-boys'/old-girls' network kicking in: Older professors are better known than younger ones, and when others in their cohort are in positions to issue conference invitations, it's natural for them to choose professors they've heard of.

But what about other kinds of faculty productivity? For example, how energetic is a professor in the classroom once he or she hits 70? Do professors in their mid-70s carry their share of departmental or university committee work? These are almost entirely matters of quality (for example, it's the work one does on a committee, not the number of committees of which one is nominally a member, that tells the tale). Common sense and experience both point to younger faculty as generally more energetic in their teaching and university service — more apt to lead students on field trips, or do the donkey work of a curriculum committee, for example — than those over 70.

Finally, it's worth noting that older faculty, by hogging an unfair share of the budget devoted to faculty salaries, exemplify the tragedy playing out in the larger social and economic arenas of all industrialized nations, where older members of society, compared with younger groups, now possess a disproportionate share of a country's wealth.

In short, American academe has created a continuing disaster by resting faculty retirement solely on the cornerstones of senior professors' self-interest and self-assessment. Unless higher education comes up with a mechanism — or social consensus — that makes retiring by 70 the honorable and decent thing to do, everyone's individ-
ual “right to work” past 70 will crush the young. Yes, continuing to be a full-time tenured professor past 70 ought to be possible, but it should be a rare privilege reserved only for the most productive and effective-in-the-classroom scholars, artists, and research scientists.

It is hard to explain sometimes that I desperately want to embrace, rather than deny, my final phase of life, and that doing this requires that I set myself up in a situation where I can sense the urgency of life. For me, that mostly means being a full-time painter again, with the chance to make just a few more good pictures before I die. I want to face retirement the way Prospero, directly addressing the audience at the end of The Tempest, voluntarily surrendered his magical powers:

Now my charms are all o’erthrown,  
And what strength I have’s mine own,  
Which is most faint: ...  
Now I want  
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant.

Professors are blind to the incontrovertible fact that in the scheme of things, they are replaceable cogs who are forgotten the moment they are gone. That is not a bad thing, but rather the heart of institutional strength.

Along with Prospero’s speech, Marcus Aurelius’s Meditations ought to be required reading for professors, for this philosopher-emperor drives home that forgetting is liberating for everyone: “The nature of the Universe loves nothing so much as to change the things which are, and to make new things like them.”

I would be lying were I to deny the sense of loss that came over me, gradually, during my last year of teaching. And it wasn’t merely emotional. My husband and I are fairly numerate, but we had calculated the cost of retirement only roughly. Jolts of intense bourgeois insecurity hit me on those drizzly winter days when I’d look out the train window on my way to school and stare at the endless rows of little houses in Queens.

Emptying my office a little at a time, over the course of the year, was my approach to leaving my job. On the day of graduation, I was left with just a couple of boxes of books and a few pictures. On my way out, I pulled out my name plaque from the holder by the side of my office door and tossed it into the trash.

A few days later, I talked to Dave Hickey about my retirement. Dave is a 74-year-old art critic who taught — contentiously — at a number of universities. He said, “The problem with teaching is that it offers an ongoing sense of redemption. In the real world, which you have now re-entered, if you muck up, there are consequences. In the university, you get a new semester to pretend nothing bad ever happened.”

Then he added, “You’re free now, Laurie. Make something of it.”

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