



The tenure system protects professors but can be a block to academic freedom for untenured staff.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Academic questions

Two provocative books skirt around why universities should get back to teaching, finds **David Helfand**.

The university of today is a fractious collection of interest groups in which customers (formerly known as students) demand high grades for their money, while researchers with large frequent-flyer accounts (formerly known as faculty) seek to minimize their teaching 'loads'. Meanwhile, property developers, who were once called academic administrators, relentlessly push for institutional expansion.

Or so a raft of books on the imminent collapse of higher education in North America would have you believe. As with most caricatures, this one contains elements of truth. I am sufficiently concerned about the state of the academy that I have taken leave from Columbia University in New York to lead a new college in Canada — Quest University — developed from scratch to place teaching and learning back at the centre. But the above portrait is oversimplified and exaggerated. Two books, Naomi Schaefer Riley's *The Faculty Lounges* and Ellen Schrecker's *The Lost Soul of Higher Education*, add to the debate — and the exaggeration.

An oft-repeated story highlights the authors' differing attitudes towards academia. When Dwight Eisenhower became president of Columbia University, two years before he became US president, he began his first faculty address with "Employees of the University..." Columbia physicist I. I. Rabi interrupted: "Excuse me, sir, but we are the University."

The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University

ELLEN SCHRECKER
New Press: 2010. 304 pp. \$27.95

The Faculty Lounges: And Other Reasons Why You Won't Get The College Education You Paid For

NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY
Ivan R. Dee: 2011. 216 pp. \$22.95

These authors split along similar lines: Riley decries the power that tenured professors wield across the university system, whereas Schrecker bemoans the loss of academic freedom and faculty governance brought about by the rise of corporatization. Both cannot be right; neither is.

Schrecker is a former editor of *Academe*, the magazine of the American Association of University Professors, the century-old, self-appointed guardian of the US tenure system. She presents a history of academic-freedom cases, both well known and obscure. Writing from a liberal standpoint, she argues that the "barrage" of conservative criticism now aimed at universities is not so much about curricula or concerns about taxpayer-supported radicals, but is a consequence of the progressive social mission of colleges. As the last haven for serious dissent and a vehicle for social mobility, she writes, the US university has become "a surrogate for everything that its critics dislike about American society".

Filling the critics' brief is *The Faculty Lounges*, largely an attack on the US professoriate. Riley, a former *Wall Street Journal* editor, questions whether modern political scientists should be counted on to improve US government, compared, say, to the authors of the Federalist Papers that promoted the US Constitution. One might answer yes, as politics has changed in two centuries. In her eyes, the answer is a clear no. Yet in my view she offers no serious analysis, instead packing the book with quotes from conservative organizations such as the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, whose website announces: "The barbarians are not at the gates; they are inside the walls." I have rarely been so irritated by a book with whose premise I broadly agree.

Riley's ideological purity undercuts her critique of tenure, and will put off readers who should contemplate this important issue. Schrecker fails to recognize that tenure is more about denying the academic freedom of those who don't have it than about protecting those who do. Postgraduates and tenure-track scholars fear crossing the ideas and personalities of the tenured faculty members who decide their fates. The problem with Schrecker's book is that it downplays this reality. The problem with Riley's is its conviction that faculty lounges are full of lazy, left-wing ideologists who aim to undermine democratic values.

The protection of underperforming faculty members and the suppression of freedom among the unanointed are real problems with the tenure system. But, in my view, there is a more crucial difficulty that both books ignore — the selection of professors. Most university professors are smart, but most smart people are not professors. Some social filter selects the few intellectuals who choose careers in academia. My concern is that this filter is tenure: seeking out those most attracted to lifetime security without performance reviews does not strike me as an optimal way to find people who are best suited to advancing the frontiers of knowledge and inspiring the next generation.

Schrecker goes on to criticize the proliferation of academic bureaucrats, citing a 2006 National Center for Education Statistics report that allegedly shows (although I could not check it) that there are more administrators than faculty members in US institutions of higher learning. I was struck by a different trend: faculty numbers are increasing even faster. At public four-year-degree institutions between 1989 and 2009, executive or administrative positions increased by 31%, while faculty grew by 54%. For private four-year institutions, the numbers are 93% and 214%, respectively. Meanwhile, the number of bachelor's degrees conferred rose by 52%.

Much of this faculty expansion, as both authors note, is in part-time positions: in 1989, part-timers made up just over one-third

of US faculty; by 2009, they were close to half the total. So, over this period, full-time faculty growth was 39% and part-time was 237%. Such positions are typically filled by scholars who are poorly paid, have little say in departmental and university affairs, and no possibility of tenure. These itinerant faculty members, once found mainly in two-year community colleges, are now prevalent throughout the academy — public and private, undergraduate colleges and research universities. Whereas women made up 28% of full professors at US degree-granting institutions in 2009, they were a majority (52%) among non-tenure-track faculty.

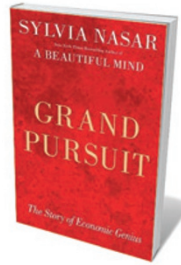
Both authors address this growth in expendable faculty, but differ as to its cause. Schrecker sees the problem as part of a general attack on faculty prerogatives and academic freedom. Riley sees it as a logical move to bring universities much-needed flexibility. A unique point of agreement between them, with which I agree, is that the growth in part-time faculty is bad for students. With limited office hours and termly contracts that exclude a role in curriculum development, part-timers are faculty in name only, without the time, resources, or support to truly educate their students.

Alternatives are possible. At Quest University Canada, a four-year-old independent institution in British Columbia that has 350 students and 25 faculty members (expected to double in five years), we have no faculty ranks, no tenure and no departments. The review and renewal of multi-year contracts for research and teaching staff are conducted by an elected committee of peers. Teaching is central to the institution's mission, and all staff share equally in this task. The mix of scholarship, curriculum development and other institutional service that, along with teaching performance, forms the basis for the review committee's judgement, is individually tailored and can vary over the course of one's career. This collegial approach fosters academic freedom, minimizes bureaucracy and places the university's focus on teaching and scholarship. Regrettably, it is unlikely to spread, owing in my view to the inherent conservatism of most academics and an unholy pact among the majority of students, faculty and administrators, all of whom benefit from the status quo.

Both books raise important questions while peddling their respective strong lines. Let's hope that the debate we sorely need in academia proceeds in a more nuanced way. ■

David Helfand is president of Quest University Canada in Squamish, British Columbia, on leave from Columbia University. e-mail: djh@astro.columbia.edu

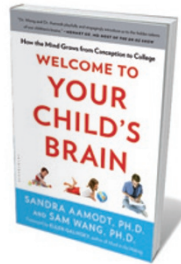
Books in brief



Grand Pursuit: The Story of Economic Genius

Sylvia Nasar SIMON & SCHUSTER 554 pp. \$35 (2011)

Sylvia Nasar, economist and author of *A Beautiful Mind* (1998), examines genius through the shaping of economics. Her tour of modern economic history takes us from Charles Dickens and journalist Henry Mayhew, who together woke the world to the scale of London poverty, through Karl Marx and the pioneering social reformers Beatrice and Sidney Webb, to great innovators such as John Maynard Keynes and Nobel prizewinner Amartya Sen. The field emerges as the 'apparatus of the mind' that Keynes saw was needed for understanding and optimizing the workings of society.



Welcome to Your Child's Brain: How the Mind Grows from Conception to College

Sandra Aamodt and Sam Wang BLOOMSBURY 336 pp. \$26 (2011)

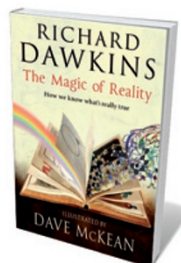
Neuroscientist Sam Wang and Sandra Aamodt, former editor-in-chief of *Nature Neuroscience*, pack into this compendium cutting-edge research on the growing brain, from birth to the age of 21. They lay out seven scientific principles behind neural development, including the interaction of genes and the environment; education; sensory experience and play; and issues such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and growing up in poverty. With its clear graphics, this is a useful companion guide for educators and families.



American Anthrax: Fear, Crime, and the Investigation of the Nation's Deadliest Bioterror Attack

Jeanne Guillemin TIMES 336 pp. \$27 (2011)

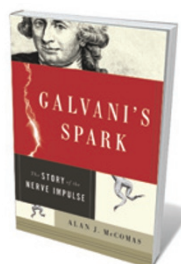
Bioterrorism is a threat that governments prepare for with huge variability. Medical anthropologist Jeanne Guillemin chronicles the deadliest such attack in the United States, when five letters carrying anthrax arrived at the Senate and at media organizations in 2001, killing five people and sparking a seven-year investigation. The event was used to justify the Iraq invasion and billions were spent on biomedical defences, yet Guillemin reminds us that the pathogen in the letters originated somewhere within the US military system.



The Magic of Reality: How We Know What's Really True

Richard Dawkins and Dave McKean BANTAM 272 pp. £20 (2011)

Faced with the strange, the sudden and the beautiful in nature, each generation of children asks the same big questions — from how the Universe began to what thunder is. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins takes on the answers, with acclaimed illustrator Dave McKean, in graphic-novel style. By detailing the hard science behind natural phenomena such as species diversity, and detaching accreted myths, Dawkins strives to reveal 'magic' as an aspect of the real. Although pitched at both children and adults, this is a heavy-handed treatment that fits into neither category.



Galvani's Spark: The Story of the Nerve Impulse

Alan J. McComas OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 391 pp. £40 (2011)

Serendipity met science when eighteenth-century anatomist Luigi Galvani discovered the nerve impulse — the 'spark' that drives actions, thoughts and sensations — in the twitch of a frog's leg. Neurophysiologist Alan McComas traces the shaping of neuroscience from this point by greats such as Alessandro Volta and David Hubel. From Santiago Ramón y Cajal's meticulous renderings of neural cells to Alan Hodgkin and Andrew Huxley's work on the squid giant axon, McComas chronicles the triumphs and obstacles of the field.