



The moral obligation to the University: The dilemma of withdrawal, tenacious incumbency, or superfluous existence

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Abstract

Many universities are plagued by members who, at a very advanced age, refuse to retire and declare themselves indispensable. In life, almost no one is indispensable. In this brief work, we address them and the community. We mention the harm they cause to the institution and the community, harm which they do not seem to understand.

Keywords: Universities, true masters, legacy, academic parasites, succession, academic lineage, social parasitism

Introduction

Following one of our research lines, we comment on the case of those who have reached retirement age or are too elderly and refuse to leave the University (Gómez-Jeria, 2023, 2025a, 2025b) ^[1, 2, 3]. The true master is not one who imposes themselves eternally, but one who prepares the ground for others to flourish, even if those others contradict, surpass, or forget them. In the capacity to cultivate without the need to remain, to leave a legacy without the need for applause, lies the ultimate greatness of the genuine academic.

Permanence Beyond the Natural Cycle: Between Legacy and Obstnacy

In any mature academic institution, generational transition is not only inevitable but desirable: it guarantees the renewal of ideas, the evolution of methodologies, and the revitalization of institutional structures. Nevertheless, there exist academics who, upon reaching retirement age or having significantly surpassed reasonable thresholds of professional activity, insist on remaining in their posts, either explicitly or through mechanisms of indirect influence, with an attachment that often exceeds reason and compromises the common good of the university.

This phenomenon can stem from various causes: an identity profoundly fused with the academic role, the fear of the existential void associated with retirement, the desire to preserve spheres of symbolic power, or a lack of meaningful interests or connections outside the academic world. In some instances, it may also arise from more altruistic motivations: a genuine commitment to teaching, the desire to complete an unfinished body of work, or the conviction that one can still contribute valuable experience to the community.

The crux of the issue, however, lies not in the mere will to continue thinking, writing, or teaching, but in the manner in which this extension is exercised and the consequences it entails.

The Question of Succession: Between Sterility and Academic Lineage

One of the most revealing aspects in these cases is whether the professor in question has possessed the clarity and generosity to mentor their successors. The creation of a school of thought, the transmission of knowledge, the

promotion of autonomous disciples, and an openness to differing perspectives constitute the unequivocal signs of a fruitful academic career.

Conversely, when an aging academic has not fostered the emergence of new voices, has monopolized knowledge as a form of control, or has exercised mentorship from an authoritarian stance or through covert competition, their prolonged presence is revealed not as a service, but as an act of institutional capture. In such instances, their refusal to retire does not stem from a desire to continue contributing, but from the fear of being replaced, forgotten, or, even worse, surpassed.

The university, like any living organism, requires circulation, not stagnation; succession, not perpetuation. The figure of the professor who reaches old age without having prepared capable disciples, or who has neutralized them for fear of competition, represents an anomaly in the healthy cycle of knowledge transmission.

The Quality of Thought in Advanced Age: Between Maturation and Repetition

From an epistemological standpoint, not all academic longevity is equivalent. There exist professors whose work, far from diminishing with age, attains in maturity a depth, perspective, and intellectual freedom that only years can confer. Such individuals constitute genuine moral and intellectual assets to the university, provided their voice does not seek to impose itself as the sole authority but rather coexists within a plurality of thought.

Conversely, there are other instances where the prolongation of an intellectual career devolves into a perilous inertia: the automatic reiteration of theories without updating, resistance to methodological change, disdain for new disciplinary languages, or, worse still, the narcissistic obstnacy of those who believe that all past times were superior because they themselves were the protagonists. These academics become custodians of their own internal museum, and their teaching no longer illuminates but rather impedes the development of new generations.

Institutional Harm: Power Without Function

When a senior professor refuses to retire without objective justification, leveraging positions of symbolic or administrative power, they generate multiple institutional dysfunctions. They obstruct promotions, delay competitive

hiring processes, block curricular innovations, or become a '*de facto eternal dean*' who opines, judges, and maneuvers from the shadows without formal accountability. Perpetuating such figures sends a disheartening message to young academics: that the only way to exist within the university is to cling to one's position, to become perpetual, to deny symbolic death.

A healthy institution must convey that retirement is a natural part of the academic life cycle, and that the dignity of a career is measured not by its duration, but by the depth of the legacy it leaves.

All of the above applies equally to Deans who, despite having a mediocre scientific record, cling to power from one four-year term to the next, ultimately departing the University while evading standard qualification processes.

I thank G.A.G.M and N.I.Y.S. for being the inspiration of the above words.

References

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