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The AAUP, 92 and Ailing

Mismanagement, declining membership, and a schizophrenic mission threaten the premier faculty association

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Washington

Ernst Benjamin has already retired once from the American Association of University Professors. He has a white beard and receding white hair. He just turned 70.

But these days, he is back in the general secretary's corner office, in a job he gave up more than a decade ago. He was called in late last year to help steer the association through management and financial crises that threaten its very existence.

"I didn't have anyone else to go to," says Cary Nelson, president of the AAUP.

The decision to appoint Mr. Benjamin exemplifies one of the AAUP's key problems: Its image as a stodgy faculty club — with an aging membership — that is no longer relevant to young professors, many of whom have never even heard of it.

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As the chief higher-education organization representing professor nationwide, the AAUP is best known for its widely cited statements on academic freedom and tenure. But in the last generation, even as the number of professors in the country has doubled, the association's membership has taken a nose dive, fror 90,000 in 1971 to 43,600 today.

On the eve of its annual meeting here this month, the AAUP face other problems, as well:

- A $250,000 budget deficit. The chief financial officer was forced out last year after he failed to produce a credible auc report.
- A membership office that was without a director for two years and failed to keep track of membership renewals, including $100,000 worth that were temporarily lost by the post office last year.
- A flood of departures among its top staff members, including five who have left in the past 16 months.
- An international meeting on academic boycotts that was canceled after an AAUP staff member mistakenly distribut an anti-Semitic article to participants.
- Accusations by members of the Executive Committee that Roger W. Bowen, who was hired as general secretary in 2004, failed to adequately manage the Washington office. Mr. Bowen, who is leaving at the end of this month, says tl job of general secretary may be too big for one person — and several association leaders agree.

Mr. Nelson, a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, has declared the worst of the AAUP's problems behind it. "We are moving out of our period of difficulty," he says. The association hired an outside accountant who has reconstructed financial transactions, line by line, and wil present last year's missing audit at this month's meeting. New software will keep track of membership renewals, and Mr. Nelso is starting a campaign to attract professors, including the sending of e-mail messages this fall to 250,000 prospects.

Topping the group's management concerns, however, are broader questions about its mission and its image. Thirty-five years after the AAUP decided to enter collective bargaining, the decision continues to roil the organization. More than half of its members are now part of an AAUP collective-bargaining unit. The rest hav no connection to the union, having joined the AAUP because the support its historic role defending academic freedom. The split ha created a schizophrenic organization, some say, that is frequently beat on both fronts: by bigger unions, like the American Federati of Teachers and the National Education Association, which are luring away members, and by younger, nimbler organizations, lik the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which want to control the national conversation about academic freedom.

"The emphasis on collective bargaining, which is a game the AAUP is not well positioned to play, takes away the strong role i

can play in promoting professional norms and academic freedom," says Joseph Losco, chairman of the political-science department at Ball State University and a member of the AAUP's National Council.

Those conflicts won't be on the official agenda at this month's annual meeting. Nor will the question of whether the 92-year-old organization will see 100.

But Michael Bérubé, a professor of English at Pennsylvania State University's main campus and a member of the AAUP's Executive Committee, says the association is now referred to as both "toothless and dangerous." Toothless, he says, because young faculty members believe they can accomplish more through their own scholarly associations, like the Modern Language Association. Dangerous, he says, because others believe that the AAUP's union activities corrupt its high-minded professional policies.

Still, asserts Mr. Bérubé, the AAUP remains the conscience of the profession. "Is there a need for the AAUP? Yes," he says. "Will it continue to exist? Good question."

Declining Numbers

The AAUP opened its doors in 1915 to defend professors' rights to express unpopular views. It produced such documents as the 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure and a 1958 statement setting out detailed procedures that colleges should follow to dismiss a tenured professor. The statements have become ubiquitous in higher education. Portions of them can still be found in most faculty handbooks.

The AAUP's membership swelled during the 1950s and 1960s. Some say it reached 100,000 professors, although historical records have been packed up and sent to a storage unit, so Mr. Benjamin says there is no quick way to verify that. The surge in membership began during the McCarthy era, when professors' loyalty to the United States was being questioned, and the increase continued as higher education expanded in the 1960s.

But starting in 1972, when the organization entered collective bargaining on behalf of professors, membership began to decline — from 90,000 in 1971 to 75,000 in 1973. The decline didn't stop until 1989, when the rolls reached a low of 40,595. Since then the number of members has risen slightly, hovering at around 44,000. But 5,000 of those are "fee payers," who don't necessarily want to be members but are required to pay annual dues because they work on one of the AAUP's 70 collective-bargaining campuses. In a sense, they are anti-members. That puts the number of voting members in the organization at fewer than 40,000.

Most of the AAUP's chapters are at regional public universities

and second-tier private liberal-arts colleges. And although the organization was founded by professors at Columbia University and the Johns Hopkins University, neither campus has an AAUP chapter today. Only a handful of major research universities do, including the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Indiana University at Bloomington.

Some blame the organization's recent problems on Mr. Bowen and the association's 37-member National Council, which often functions like an overgrown faculty department, with personality clashes, finger-pointing, and petty feuds. It is no secret that Mr. Bowen did not get along with Mr. Nelson, whom Mr. Bowen has accused of trying to micromanage the Washington office and of undermining him and other leaders. But the departing general secretary also became frustrated with the monumental task of righting the struggling organization.

Some council members accuse Mr. Nelson and a small group of his colleagues of keeping others out of power and, in the process, running the association into the ground. But the AAUP's problems were brewing long before either Mr. Bowen or Mr. Nelson took over. They have more to do with questions about the organization's mission than with who is running the show.

What's My Line?

Despite its many problems, the AAUP continues to do some things well. Since 2000 it has issued statements on several hot issues in academe, including preserving academic freedom in the wake of September 11; affording due process to part-time faculty members; and colleges' handling of controversial speakers. The group submitted a brief that influenced a 2006 U.S. Supreme Court case, in which the justices exempted professors from a ruling that limits the free-speech rights of public employees. "We become involved in the crucial issues of the times dealing with professors," says David M. Rabban, a professor at the University of Texas School of Law who until recently served as the AAUP's general counsel. "We make a real difference."

The association has also just released a report criticizing five New Orleans universities that laid off faculty members and cut programs following Hurricane Katrina. "We're the only game in town producing these principled statements," says Mr. Nelson.

At this month's meeting, the association will consider censuring those five New Orleans institutions plus two others. Censuring colleges is something the AAUP alone has done since 1930. It typically receives more than 1,000 inquiries each year from faculty members who accuse administrators of threatening their academic freedom. The association takes up only 10 percent of the cases, and an even smaller fraction result in a formal investigation that can lead to censure. Forty-three institutions are now on the censure list. Colleges can work their way off by revising their policies.

But even on a task it had cornered — actually, that it created — the AAUP is now often getting beat. It can take the AAUP more than a year to complete an investigation and issue a report. By then, faculty members who originally complained are often long gone from an institution and have little hope of winning their jobs back, regardless of what the AAUP finds. "Our fundamental focus is for the principle of academic due process," says Jonathan Knight, "even if the person is no longer there." Mr. Knight directs the AAUP's department of academic freedom, tenure, and governance.

Increasingly, professors with academic-freedom complaints have been turning to younger groups, like the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which has a track record of moving quickly. It does not perform lengthy investigations. It simply sends an e-mail message to reporters, publicizing a professor's problem with administrators. It uses news-media exposure to persuade colleges to change their policies. Some accuse FIRE of taking up primarily conservative causes, but it does get attention — and frequently gets results.

At AAUP, says Mr. Losco, the Ball State professor, "We've not done a good job of getting out in front of issues and making our case. There is a long tradition of wanting to be careful. It's always a rear-guard action."

The AAUP's stand on academic freedom has also taken a hit, some say, in the battle over the "academic bill of rights," a set of principles purportedly geared to making colleges more intellectually diverse. The document was written by David Horowitz, a conservative activist, who has accused liberal professors of espousing their political views in the classroom and of penalizing students who disagree. The AAUP's leaders have spent countless hours rebutting his claims.

"It is pretty clear there is a problem, but the AAUP tends to stick to a specific line," says William Pannapacker, an associate professor of English at Hope College. He is not an AAUP member, primarily, he says, because he cannot afford the annual dues, which range from $155 to $188 for full-time professors. "They have been slow to assume a more moderate position," he says. "I think they might be too orthodox and absolutist."

Donald Downs, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, started his own Committee for Academic Freedom and Rights 10 years ago, bypassing the AAUP. He says the association has ignored contemporary threats to academic freedom, which, he argues, come from the campus itself. "The vast majority of censorship within universities has come from the left in the era of political correctness," he says. "In my view, the AAUP has not been nearly as good on that as it was during the McCarthy era, when the threat came from outside the university and left-wing professors were being persecuted."

Labor Pains

What appears to have hurt the AAUP's image the most, however, is its role in collective bargaining. "The more that AAUP membership is dominated by trade unionists, the less likely it is that the AAUP can perform the role that made it a household name in academia," says David A. Hollinger, chairman of the history department at the University of California at Berkeley. He was not a member of the association until he was asked to be part of its Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure, in 2003.

Professors at elite research universities, he says, aren't interested in being linked to a union. They don't need one. Faculty members at high-profile institutions typically have powerful academic reputations and can call their own shots when it comes to job duties and salary. In their minds, says Mr. Hollinger, the AAUP's union aspect tarnishes the organization.

Acting as union representatives has also depleted its resources, other academics argue.

"When they went into collective bargaining, there was always a question of what value-added they were really bringing," says Clara M. Lovett, who was president of the American Association of Higher Education when it closed in 2005. "What does the AAUP do that the NEA or the AFT are not able to do? I'm not sure that's ever been resolved. It may have drained the AAUP's energy from other things they could have been doing."

Professors who are members of the collective-bargaining units says the AAUP brings its venerable reputation to the table, making it unique among the unions representing higher education. At the same time, these professors worry about whether the group has the power, expertise, and resources to bargain effectively. Some collective-bargaining chapters, including Wayne State University — one of the AAUP's oldest — and Rutgers University — its largest — have also recently joined up with the American Federation of Teachers, while maintaining their ties to the AAUP. Charles J. Parrish, a professor who leads Wayne State's collective-bargaining chapter, says that in Detroit, in the midst of the auto industry, it only makes sense for the university to sign up with a larger, more powerful union.

Worried that such a trend might cut into its finances and reduce its influence, the AAUP has prohibited chapters from reducing their dues to the association if they add affiliations to other collective-bargaining representatives. Some professors believe the association should sell off its collective-bargaining operation to a bigger union, and the AFT has been pushing to forge a formal relationship so the two groups can organize on campuses together. Mr. Nelson says that while he is not opposed to that idea, it is important that the AAUP stay in the game. The AFT, he says,

"doesn't quite have the credibility on academic-freedom issues and shared-governance issues."

Maybe the solution, some AAUP members say, is to split the group in two. The association is considering a restructuring that would separate its academic-freedom work from collective bargaining, creating two units under one umbrella. The change is intended to give each of the two entities more freedom to pursue its own goals. Details of how it would work are still sketchy, but members will begin talking about the separation at this month's meeting.

The AAUP is also considering hiring two people to replace Mr. Bowen: one to mind the office and one to be a traveling spokesperson for academic freedom. And it is expanding its membership into the ranks of part-time professors and graduate students, although their dues are so low — most pay only about $40 a year — that the organization must sign up four of them for every full-paying professor it loses.

To bulk up its finances, the AAUP has announced its first capital campaign, with a goal of $10-million. It has raised about $1-million so far. More money certainly couldn't hurt. The AAUP's headquarters here is a spare collection of offices with dark-green indoor-outdoor carpeting and light-blue-green walls marred by black scuff marks.

A reminder of its once august heyday is tucked into a small room off a main corridor. Embedded in a wall are 157 wooden file-card holders filled with tens of thousands of 3-by-5 cards, each containing the name and address of a member, the date he or she joined, and a history of dues payments. Changes are marked in pencil.

One card traces Albert Einstein's membership, starting in 1935. The card was marked "deceased" in 1955, three days after his death.

All of the association's membership records are now computerized, part of the new software that the office has been struggling to work the kinks out of for six months. If a member died today, it could take months for the AAUP to notice.

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