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ADVICE

The Furlough Blues

By Keith D. Miller | APRIL 10, 2009

I am taking 12 days of furlough — mandated, unpaid leave — this semester. Why am I, a professor of English, required to do that? Doesn't that happen only to blue-collar workers at a GM assembly plant? And is it actually possible for an academic to take a furlough? If so, how?

I'll spare you the long explanation about greedy bankers, lax federal oversight, and profligate consumers, and skip right to economic bedlam. Witnessing it, administrators at my institution, Arizona State University, announced last fall that they would not rehire our "faculty associates," who teach on one-semester contracts, this spring. In January certain Arizona legislators declared that our three state universities needed to excise gargantuan sums from our fiscal-2009 budgets. All manner of lawmakers, reporters, and university administrators eagerly began tossing figures back and forth in the newspapers. While the numbers varied considerably, each sum easily surpassed \$100-million.

Ominous conversations snaked through our corridors. Being economically challenged, I figured that the fiscal 2009 budget would begin in August 2009; otherwise it would be called the calendar-year budget, wouldn't it? I also reasoned that nobody could possibly propose such monstrous budget cuts for a semester that would start that same month — not with classes already scheduled and tuition bills already paid. I soon realized, however, that all the intense debate wasn't about cuts that would happen next year; fiscal-year 2009 is occurring now, and the university budget is being cut by more than \$100-million now.

Prompted by a colleague, I ventured to the well-manicured lawn of our state Capitol to attend a press conference that featured the three presidents of our state universities and a representative of the Board of Regents. Three of those men performed, predictably

enough, like suits, talking in monotones as they politely asked the Legislature to reconsider. One of them stared at the notes he was reading, exposing the top of his head to the television cameras.

Only the president of Arizona State, Michael Crow, with whom I disagree fairly often, spoke articulately and passionately about the devastation to the state economy if the Legislature were to cripple the finances of the universities. I found myself applauding Crow when he sparred successfully with one self-important journalist.

President Crow spared some laudable special events from the budget ax, such as the scheduled visit of Stephen Hawking and six Nobel Prize-winning scientists this month — a conference that I attended with my 13-year-old son, Andrew. Crow also reduced costs by combining certain departments and eliminating some programs.

Those moves did not suffice. In late January, he and our provost, Elizabeth Capaldi, mandated that, during the spring semester, all university employees would have to take unpaid days off: nine days for some, 12 days for others (including me), and 15 days for administrators.

Our administrators initially told us that we could not work on furlough days. Then they stated that we might volunteer to serve the university during some or all of our furlough time. They further informed us that in each department, a staff member would have to track which days we would select for our furloughs (presumably that would be done on one of the staff member's nonfurlough days). We were not allowed to cancel classes or office hours.

I don't blame our administrators for being slightly confused at first. I don't think that any of them could have anticipated the scenario that unfolded. In an English-department meeting, our chair, Neal Lester, said that administrators had required furloughs in order to save as many positions as possible.

With furloughs mandated, many of us began to wonder: How do we actually reduce our work?

An inveterate lover of baseball, I could, of course, take a day off, my son Andrew could ditch school (just once!), and we could enjoy a spring-training game. We could relish 70 degrees, sunshine, and peanuts while watching Vladimir Guerrero mash triples.

But upon returning to my office, I would need to tackle two days' worth of e-mail messages from students and colleagues. I'd need to sort through two days' worth of applications from Ph.D. candidates — work that has to occur quickly so we can corral the best ones before they wander off to other programs. I'd also need to read through two days' worth of drafts of M.A. theses and doctoral dissertations. And the time I had to spend planning and teaching my classes would not diminish. How about the time it takes to console a shocked undergraduate who tells me, tearfully, that her brother just died?

If I could somehow reduce my workdays, I would confront another dilemma: Should I? Don't I owe every student my full effort? How can I do anything that might even slightly reduce the quality of my students' education? Shouldn't I do my utmost to help select those who most deserve admission to our Ph.D. program? If I devote less time to my research, the best journals certainly won't accept it. Didn't we all sign some sort of Hippocratic oath in which we vowed to educate as much as possible? And what about a friend who is on sabbatical? Should he stop doing research on his furlough days? It's hard to imagine how scientists could stop their laboratory experiments for even a day, let alone 12.

Administrators face a related conundrum. In March 2010, when our chair will measure faculty performance as part of the annual merit-review process, I assume that he will take furloughs into account. But will he write, "This professor could have taught better, but the furlough interfered"? Should he write that?

I guess I should simply ignore my supposed furlough and nobly maintain my professional honor by continuing to work as usual. But — and here comes another dilemma — if other professors and I shoulder our normal hours, aren't we also undermining higher education? In that case, the Legislature and the new governor would be forcing our administrators to take a meat cleaver to our budget while people like me

help conceal the butchery from students. Continuing to work as usual would amount to pretending that we were seriously overpaid and underworked before heroic, cost-conscious legislators prompted the university to prune our wages and our workdays.

And consider the janitor on my floor, whose husband's job disappeared and who is losing 12 days' wages. Students need to know that she deserves a raise, not reduced pay. Then there are the dozens of full-time instructors in our department — many of whom are excellent and all of whom are on annual contracts — whose hiring is on the shelf and who have no idea whether they will be asked to re-enlist for the fall.

Back at home, my son makes his violin sing before washing the dishes and the dog. He repairs my cellphone and my forgetfulness. Despite his help, as a single parent, I find too few hours to maintain the many inestimably important totems and talismans of middle-class respectability. If I sit for a haircut at the barbershop, that means not mopping the kitchen floor. Mopping the floor means I don't have time to replace the dead microwave. Going out to buy a microwave means putting off snipping the wildly overgrown bougainvillea. Trimming the bougainvillea — well, you get the idea. Every task gets done, but not quickly enough for those totems and talismans to operate at their full powers and, thus, help the nation survive. Somehow my friends forgive me.

In class, I explain the furloughs to students. One day I bounce an automatic response — OUT OF OFFICE AND UNAVAILABLE DUE TO MANDATED, UNPAID FURLOUGH — to anyone bold enough to e-mail me. On that day, the same notice adorns my office door.

I don't tell anyone that I will spend the first day of my furlough buying a new lawnmower to attack plants that mysteriously slipped into my previously worthy backyard, partied, got drunk, rioted, killed one mower, and threaten to choke my house.

After repelling the botanical invaders, I will sleep well, arrive at my office the following morning at dawn, and perform two days' labor within eight hours. I will thrill my classes. The best Ph.D. candidates will commit to our program. The superb editor of a most exceptional journal will rejoice upon reading my best-ever essay. Further, President

Obama's stimulus package will resurrect the economy, and no one will dynamite our university budget again. The janitor will receive a raise. Instructors will return, smiling. The furlough blues will end.

Teachers can always hope.

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