

Behind the Closed Doors of the "Professoriate"

Anthony Julian Tamburri (May 02, 2013)



The world of post-high school education has always been fascinating, intriguing, and, in a number of cases, perplexing. It is a place where — for four years, usually — young people are exposed to a plethora of ideas that challenge the student's current mode of thought. Ideally, the world of the university / college opens us up to different perspectives on how we look at the world. In much of



this new pondering of the world, we may also find an invitation to consider how we look at things within the moral compass of "right vs. wrong."

What college / university students do not necessarily know is what goes on behind the closed doors of the world of professors and administrators. It is here that we find a series of issues that (1) may create conflict, (2) may threaten the actual curriculum of which the institution purports to be most proud, (3) may threaten the quality of the teaching, and, definitely not last in any list of this type, (4) may, as a consequence of the previous three phenomena, threaten the morale and, to be sure, the livelihood of those most qualified professors precisely because of the abused adoption of lecturers and adjuncts — as opposed to tenure-track positions — who often deliver the curricula that the very colleges and universities publicize as their strong point!

The case below is an example par excellence of what takes place in the world of United States colleges and universities. Full-time lecturers and part-time adjuncts do in fact deliver a good deal of the curricula in many institutions of higher education; the average of such individuals may often reach 40-45% of the teaching staff. This, I believe, is especially true with regard to those so-called "small" programs, those seemingly exotic curricula (of which Italian is sometimes considered) that, according to those traditional thinkers, for whom college is supposed to provide you with job "qualifications." As such, this is the situation — and this is not supposition — with numerous Italian programs nation-wide. Regardless of the demand by the students or, better still, the significance of the curricula within Western Civilization, these courses are often delivered by the full-time lecturers and part-time adjuncts.

Before offering up to you the letter that Dr. Van Watson sent to his/my colleagues in Italian Studies, I would simply state that — while this is not the place to debate the issue; indeed, much more needs to be said — colleges and universities have grown exponentially their administrations, while the professoriate (full-time, tenure track) has shrunken.

Finally, once you have read the letter below, should you feel moved to express your support, you might write to any and all of the following: Provost Andrew C. Comrie <comrie@email.arizona.edu [2]>; Dean, Mary Wildner-Bassett <wildnerb@email.arizona.edu [3]>; Department Chair, Fabian Alfie <alfie@email.arizona.edu [4]>.

You may also sign the petition included in the letter below from Professor Nathalie Hester. By the way, the April 30th deadline is not a fixed one; you can still sign the petition.



From: van watson <[Calibri;color:#0000E9">vanwatson@hotmail.com](mailto:vanwatson@hotmail.com) [5]>

Date: Monday, April 15, 2013 10:34 PM

To: [Sent to numerous senior professors in Italian Studies]



Subject: after 13 years, non-renewal

As some of you may already know, after 13 years at the University of Arizona, two weeks ago I informed that my year-by-year renewable contract here will not be renewed for next year. We currently have 98 majors, perhaps the largest Italian undergraduate program in the country. While my colleagues have had a teaching load of 2/2, my load has been 3/3, plus I teach a disproportional share of the larger courses, while still teaching 400-level courses on Pirandello, on Goldoni, and on Pasolini taught in Italian. I have also taught all levels of language here. In other words, I have taught more courses and far more students than anyone else here in what is, by any measure, a truly successful program. I was the first person at the university to be promoted from Adjunct Assistant to Adjunct Associate Professor, which was good, inasmuch as it was a promotion, but also bad, inasmuch as it avoided the tenure issue. My position here has had a service and research requirement, just as if I were a tenure track professor, but without the support for research that such a professor would otherwise receive. My research for publication suffered considerably as I have been assigned courses completely outside my area of expertise--ancient Rome, and medieval and Renaissance Italian--as no one else wanted to teach them. When I originally came here, it was solely as a Modernist with theatre and film specializations. As a teacher, I have been nominated for the Distinguished Teaching Award here about five years ago, and a number of my students inform me that this is currently happening again, although this nomination has not yet been officially announced. If this is so, I will be the only faculty member in my department to have been nominated for this award twice in the 13 years that I have been here. I have had three Fulbright winners from our program who have taken four courses with me; no other instructor here can make such a claim. In any case, on my Annual Performance Reviews I have always scored "Highest Merit," the highest category we have at this university. As a member of a French and Italian Department, wherein French professors outnumber the Italians 3-to-1, I have been passed over more than once during my time here for French positions, and twice I have been passed over for spousal accommodations in Italian. In short, by no objective measure is my non-renewal a good decision for our program. In meetings with my chair and dean, they confirmed that no job performance issue or incident has served as a basis for this decision. How could there be? 12 of my 15 colleagues have written a letter of protest regarding the decision to my chair and dean, the latter refusing to meet with them. (My three colleagues in our Second Language Acquisition Training program have officially remained silent, though none of them supports my chair in this, and one has voiced his personal and open hostility against my chair.) Nathalie Hester of the University of Oregon has kindly offered to organize a letter of protest from my colleagues at other institutions against my non-renewal through the AAIS listserv. I am sending you this mass email because you may not belong to the AAIS this year, but have in the past. In addition, if you could please disseminate this information to anyone of your colleagues who might know me from conferences, publications, or other venues, such as film or theatre conferences, I would very much appreciate any support you can give.

Grazie mille, William Van Watson

----- Forwarded Message -----

From: Nathalie Hester

To: Nathalie Hester

Sent: Wednesday, April 24, 2013 12:23 AM



Subject: Letter of support for William Van Watson, U. of Arizona Italian Studies

Dear colleagues,

As some of you may know, last month the Department of French and Italian at the University of Arizona decided not to renew the contract of Professor William Van Watson, Adjunct Associate Professor of Italian. After 13 years at the University of Arizona, he was told on March 21 that his contract would end on May 19, 2013.

This decision was made without explanation (the number of Italian majors is a healthy 98), despite Van Watson's stellar annual performance reviews, significant contributions to the field of Cinema Studies, and strong support from faculty members in his department.

I hope you will consider signing a letter of concern addressed to the Chair of the Department of French and Italian at the University of Arizona. The action taken by this department affects not just an esteemed colleague, but also the state of Italian Studies, as it erodes job security for those non-tenure-track faculty members with a proven record of successful teaching.

To sign the letter, please go to <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/van-watson/> [6]. Also, please consider sending this link to colleagues. We need to collect as many signatures as possibly by April 30, 2013.

Sincerely yours,

Nathalie Hester

Associate Professor

Dept. of Romance Languages

University of Oregon

Source URL: <http://ftp.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/op-eds/article/behind-closed-doors-professoriate>



Links

- [1] <http://ftp.ility.org/files/35956cartoonprof-11367412128.jpeg>
- [2] <mailto:comrie@email.arizona.edu>
- [3] <mailto:wildnerb@email.arizona.edu>
- [4] <mailto:alfie@email.arizona.edu>
- [5] <mailto:vanwatson@hotmail.com>
- [6] <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/van-watson/>