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The ’60s Begin to Fade as Liberal Professors Retire

By PATRICIA COHEN

MADISON, Wis. — When Michael Olneck was standing, arms linked with other protesters, singing “We Shall Not Be Moved” in front of Columbia University’s library in 1968, Sara Goldrick-Rab had not yet been born.

When he won tenure at the University of Wisconsin here in 1980, she was 3. And in January, when he retires at 62, Ms. Goldrick-Rab will be just across the hall, working to earn a permanent spot on the same faculty from which he is departing.

Together, these Midwestern academics, one leaving the professoriate and another working her way up, are part of a vast generational change that is likely to profoundly alter the culture at American universities and colleges over the next decade.

Baby boomers, hired in large numbers during a huge expansion in higher education that continued into the ’70s, are being replaced by younger professors who many of the nearly 50 academics interviewed by The New York Times believe are different from their predecessors — less ideologically polarized and more politically moderate.

“There’s definitely something happening,” said Peter W. Wood, executive director of the National Association of Scholars, which was created in 1987 to counter attacks on Western culture and values. “I hear from quite a few faculty members and graduate students from around the country. They are not really interested in fighting the battles that have been fought over the last 20 years.”

Individual colleges and organizations like the American Association of University Professors are already bracing for what has been labeled the graying of the faculty. More than 54 percent of full-time faculty members in the United States were older than 50 in 2005, compared with 22.5 percent in 1969. How many will actually retire in the next decade or so depends on personal preferences and health, as well as how their pensions fare in the financial markets.

Yet already there are signs that the intense passions and polemics that roiled campuses during the past couple of decades have begun to fade. At Stanford a divided anthropology department reunited last year after a bitter split in 1998 broke it into two entities, one focusing on culture, the other on biology. At Amherst, where military recruiters were kicked out in 1987, students crammed into a lecture hall this year to listen as alumni who served in Iraq urged them to join the military.

In general, information on professors’ political and ideological leanings tends to be scarce. But a new study of the social and political views of American professors by Neil Gross at the University of British Columbia and Solon Simmons at George Mason University found that the notion of a generational divide is more than
a glancing impression. "Self-described liberals are most common within the ranks of those professors aged 50-64, who were teenagers or young adults in the 1960s," they wrote, making up just under 50 percent. At the same time, the youngest group, ages 26 to 35, contains the highest percentage of moderates, some 60 percent, and the lowest percentage of liberals, just under a third.

When it comes to those who consider themselves "liberal activists," 17.2 percent of the 50-64 age group take up the banner compared with only 1.3 percent of professors 35 and younger.

“These findings with regard to age provide further support for the idea that, in recent years, the trend has been toward increasing moderatism,” the study says.

The authors are not talking about a political realignment. Democrats continue to overwhelmingly outnumber Republicans among faculty, young and old. But as educators have noted, the generation coming up appears less interested in ideological confrontations, summoning Barack Obama's statement about the elections of 2000 and 2004: "I sometimes felt as if I were watching the psychodrama of the Baby Boom generation — a tale rooted in old grudges and revenge plots hatched on a handful of college campuses long ago — played out on the national stage.”

With more than 675,000 professors at the nation’s more than 4,100 four-year and two-year institutions, it is easy to find faculty members, young and old, who defy any mold. Still, this move to the middle is "certainly the conventional wisdom," said Jack H. Schuster, who along with Martin J. Finkelstein, wrote “The American Faculty,” a comprehensive analysis of existing data on the profession. “The agenda is different now than what it had been.”

With previous battles already settled, like the creation of women’s and ethnic studies departments, moderation can be found at both ends of the political spectrum. David DesRosiers, executive director of the Veritas Fund for Higher Education Reform, which contributes to conservative activities on campuses, said impending retirements present an opportunity. However, he added, “we’re not looking for fights,” but rather “a civil dialogue.” His model? A seminar on great books at Princeton jointly taught by two philosophers, the left-wing Cornel West and the right-wing Robert P. George.

Changes in institutions of higher education themselves are reinforcing the generational shuffle. Health sciences, computer science, engineering and business — fields that have tended to attract a somewhat greater proportion of moderates and conservatives — have grown in importance and size compared with the more liberal social sciences and humanities, where many of the bitterest fights over curriculum and theory occurred.

At the same time, shrinking public resources overall and fewer tenure-track jobs in the humanities have pushed younger professors in those fields to concentrate more single-mindedly on their careers. Academia, once somewhat insulated from market pressures, is today treated like a business. This switch is a “major ideological and philosophical shift in how society views higher education,” Mr. Schuster and Mr. Finkelstein write in “The American Faculty.”

And with more women in the ranks (nearly 40 percent of the total in 2005 compared with 17.3 percent in 1969), different sorts of issues like family-friendly benefits have been brought to the table.
One way to understand the sense that a new mood is emerging on American campuses is to look at the
difference between the world that existed when Mr. Olneck was making his way and the one in which Ms.
Goldrick-Rab is coming up.

The '60s Generation

Michael Olneck slides into a booth at Kabul Restaurant on State Street, a few steps from the sprawling
Madison campus and its 41,000 students. “I was a pink-diaper baby,” he said pushing his bicycle helmet
aside and smoothing the unruly strands of gray hair on his head.

His father was a Socialist. Right out of high school, in 1964, Mr. Olneck organized support for the
Mississippi Project’s black voter-registration drives. Later, he took a bus to Washington to protest the war in
Vietnam, served on the strike coordinating committee at Harvard during the American invasion of

Similar events embedded themselves in the minds of many students at the time. A few blocks from the
restaurant is a plaque commemorating protests that rattled the university in the 1960s and ’70s: the seizure
of the student movement by radicals, the deadly bombing of a campus research lab, the clubbing of antiwar
demonstrators.

Those sorts of experiences are alien to younger professors, Mr. Olneck explained, so “they may not be as
instinctively anti-authoritarian; they just don’t have that in their background.”

The protests ultimately died down here and elsewhere. Mr. Olneck ended up in front of the class, and like
many academics from his generation, he brought the same spirited questioning and conscience that had
animated his student years to his job as an education and sociology professor.

Yet to some traditionalists, preoccupations like Mr. Olneck’s grated. The conservative philosopher Allan
Bloom captured the bitter splits — better known as the culture wars — in his influential best seller “The
Closing of the American Mind” in 1987. He detailed fights over the scarcity of women and people of color in
the curriculum, the proliferation of pop-culture courses, doubts about the existence of any eternal truths and
new theories that declared moral values to be merely an expression of power. These rancorous disputes
often spilled into the nation’s political discourse.

When Mr. Olneck earned his degree, traditional views of American education were also being upended.
Radical revisionists ridiculed the view of public education as a beneficent democratic project. They raised
questions about equal access, how schools reinforced class differences, and whether social science should, or
even could be free of ideology.

At the start of his career, Mr. Olneck traced the links between where someone’s family came from and where
they ended up on the economic and social ladder. Although he has done quantitative research, 20 years ago
he jettisoned number-centric studies for historical narrative, exploring how schools throughout the 20th
century responded to immigrants and diversity. In his work one can detect some of the era’s preoccupations
when he argues, for instance, that fights over bilingualism and standard English were about power.

The same goes for his extracurricular activities. In 1989 he worked to kick the R.O.T.C. off campus because
of the Defense Department’s ban on homosexuals. (The effort failed.) More recently, his neighborhood was riled by a Walgreens plan to open a drugstore. “All these people who had protested the war and civil rights,” Mr. Olneck said, laughing; Walgreens “didn’t know what hit ’em.”

Last fall, he taught Race, Ethnicity and Inequality in American Education, which he introduces in the syllabus: “Schools in the United States promise equal opportunity. They have not kept that promise. In this course, we will try to find out why.” Like many sociologists and education researchers, Mr. Olneck said that today both the kinds of analyses and the theories that prevailed when he was in college have changed. Overarching narratives, societal critiques and clarion calls for change — of the capitalist system or the social structure — have gone out of style. Today, with advances in statistical methods, many sociologists have moved to model themselves on clinical researchers with large, randomized experiments as their gold standard. In their eyes, this more scientific approach is less explicitly ideological than other kinds of research.

Ms. Goldrick-Rab has embraced such experiments. A graduate course she created — partly based on her research of community colleges — focused on “educational opportunity and inequality” at community colleges, with an “emphasis on the critical evaluation and assessment of current up-to-date research.”

Another Wisconsin professor, Erik Olin Wright, a 61-year-old sociologist and a Marxist theorist, described it this way: “There has been some shift away from grand frameworks to more focused empirical questions.”

As for his own approach, Mr. Wright said, “in the late ’60s and ’70s, the Marxist impulse was central for those interested in social justice.” Now it resides at the margins.

A New Generation

“I was part of a new wave of hires,” Sara Goldrick-Rab said, peering over the top of her laptop at her favorite off-campus work site, the Espresso Royale cafe. She came to the University of Wisconsin in 2004 and, like Mr. Olneck, has a joint appointment in educational policy studies and sociology, both departments considered among the best in the country.

Now 31, she grew up in a Washington suburb, Fairfax, Va., when Ronald Reagan was in the White House and corporate mergers were the rage. At George Washington University she was active in a campaign to end the death penalty, but for most of her classmates the late 1990s were marked by economic growth, peace and student apathy.

“My generation is not so ideologically driven,” she said.

That doesn’t mean she doesn’t want to engage a larger audience and influence policy. She considers herself the “intellectual heir” of her senior colleagues — “It’s like working with your grandparents,” she said fondly — and she cares deeply about educational inequality, often writing about the subject on a blog she created with her husband.

But she also is aware of differences between the generations.

A Sensibility Gap
“Senior people evaluate us for tenure and the standards they use and what we think is important are different,” she said. They want to question values and norms; “we are more driven by data.”

Her newest project is collaborating on what she calls the “first rigorous test in the country” to measure whether needs-based financial aid increases the chances that low-income students will graduate from college. It involves 42 colleges and 6,000 students, and will combine statistics with more in-depth interviews.

As for partisan politics, when she wrote an article in May for Pajamasmedia.com about welfare reform cutting off poor people’s access to higher education, some friends and co-workers were surprised by its appearance on that conservative blog. She said she didn’t know; she had not paid attention to its political bent.

When Ms. Goldrick-Rab speaks of added pressures on her generation, she talks about being pregnant or taking care of her 17-month-old while trying to earn tenure. The lack of paid leave for mothers is high on her list of complaints about university life.

At a conference titled “Generational Shockwaves,” sponsored in November by the TIAA-CREF Institute, Joan Girgus, a special assistant to the dean of faculty at Princeton, underscored how these sorts of concerns were increasingly on the minds of younger faculty members. Universities need to focus more on the “life” side of the work-life balance “because faculties historically were almost entirely male and the wives took care of the family side,” Ms. Girgus said. “I don’t think we can do that anymore.” Ask Ms. Goldrick-Rab if she believes there is a gap between her generation and the boomers, and she immediately answers yes.

Mr. Olneck and Mr. Wright are more cautious. “Some of my closest colleagues are 25 years younger than I am and I feel absolutely no barrier of sensibility,” Mr. Wright said.

For him, the institutional shifts outweigh any others: “I don’t think the big things have anything to do with generational change, but with financial pressures on education,” he said.

Wisconsin is part of the state’s university’s system, for example, but it receives only 18 percent of its total budget from the Legislature. The rest comes from donations, foundations, federal research grants and corporations. Mr. Wright and Mr. Olneck worry how constantly having a hand out — particularly to corporations — may affect attitudes and policies. Mr. Olneck mentioned the long list of labs and classrooms named after companies like Halliburton, Pillsbury and Ford Motor Company.

The market sensibility may account for what Mr. Olneck and others call an increasing careerism among junior faculty members. Jackson Lears, 62, a historian at Rutgers University in New Jersey, said, “I don’t think that necessarily means a move to the right, but a less overt stance of political engagement.”

Gerald Graff, president of the Modern Language Association and author of the 1992 book “Beyond the Culture Wars,” is more skeptical, saying he hasn’t seen evidence of change at the University of Illinois in Chicago, where he teaches English. “You’d think that the further we get away from the ’60s, where a lot of our political attitudes are nurtured, there would be,” he said, “but I have to say it doesn’t seem to be happening.”
Certainly some disciplines, like literary studies, seem more resistant to change. Elsewhere, senior faculty members are more likely to hire young scholars in their own mold, while some baby boomers have adopted the attitudes and styles of their younger peers.

But as scholars across fields argue, the historical era in which a generation develops — the Depression, wartime or peaceful affluence — is a defining moment for its members. “My generational paradigm is the end of the cold war,” said Matthew Woessner, a 35-year-old conservative and political scientist at Penn State Harrisburg. He and his wife, April Kelly-Woessner, a political scientist at nearby Elizabethtown College who is a year younger and a moderate, have been analyzing faculty survey responses for a new book. The notion that campuses are naturally radical or the birthplace of social movements, Ms. Kelly-Woessner said, was specific to the 1960s and '70s. “I think the younger generation does look at it differently.”