The Limits of Loyalty

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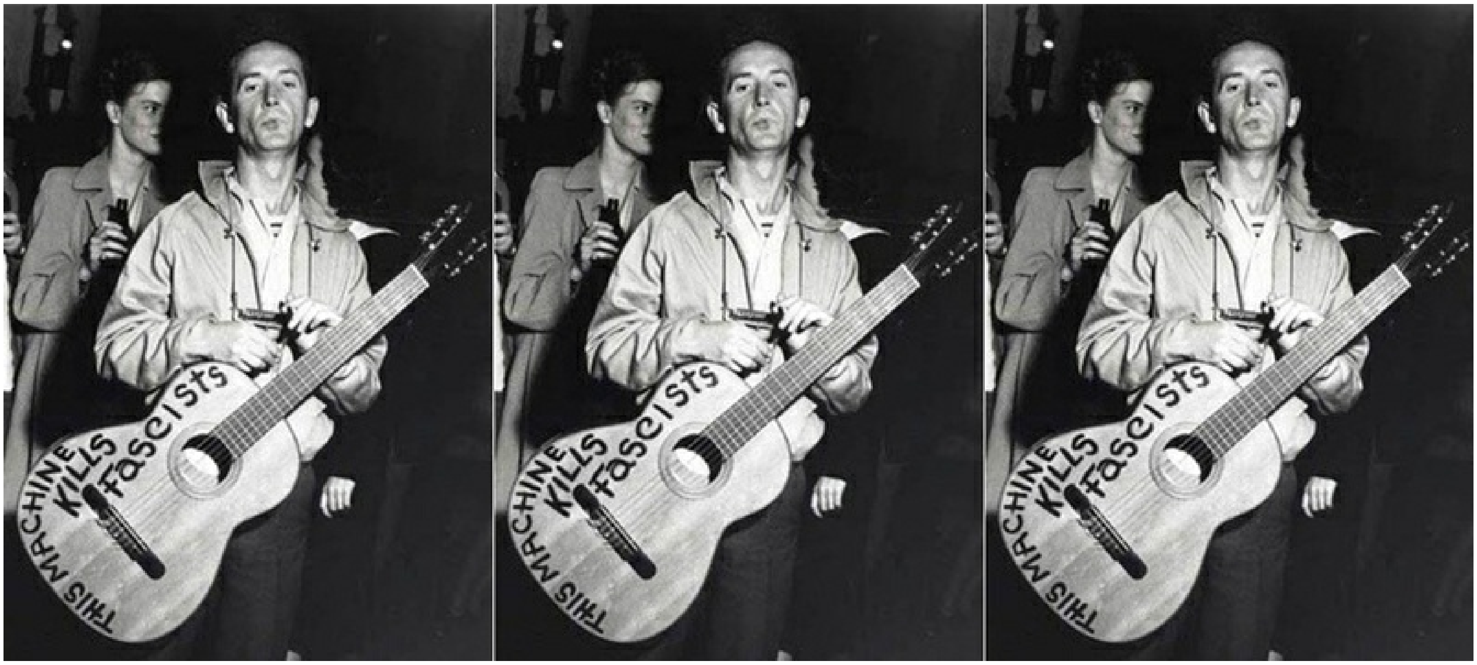

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For the past 18 years, I have worked at the same university. I see some distinct advantages in that — most notably, that I haven't had to look for another job in all that time. There is also something to be said for avoiding the pains of relocating. And staying put has allowed me to establish really rewarding ties with the surrounding community.

But there are also serious problems for any academic who pursues a faculty career in one place. As my Twitter friend John Warner recently noted, perhaps the most common way for professors to get a raise is to apply for a job elsewhere. Then, if you get a job offer, you take it to administrators at your current campus and try to get them to match the salary and benefits you would receive if you changed jobs.

That used to be the case, anyway. Unfortunately, in this age of austerity, a common response now to faculty who follow this offer-counteroffer tactic is: "So long, it's been good to know you!"

If administrators think so little of you that they're willing to let you go rolling along, how much loyalty do you owe them? "They" — meaning "the system" — "likely have no loyalty for you," Warner argues. "You owe them none in return."

Of course, I agree with that when "they" refers to administrators of all kinds. After all, they're far more likely to move on to their next job somewhere else in the higher-ed system than you are, and far less likely to accept a lesser salary out of a sense of loyalty. Why should you act any different than they would if they were in your shoes?

But what about other parts of academia that are far less utilitarian? For example, what loyalty do you owe your students when making your career decisions?

We should all hope that most of our students will be gone from the campus even faster than our least favorite associate dean, but I would argue that faculty do owe some loyalty to our students. If you're advising graduate students at the moment of your departure, for example, you'll probably want to talk to your new institution about bringing them with you. However, you also owe it to your future students not to stay at a place that is making you miserable because that will inevitably affect your teaching for the worse.

Your colleagues are also part of "the system." What loyalty do you owe them? If you're scheduled to teach in the fall, you probably ought to tell the department chair that you're leaving as soon as you sign a contract because filling your classes at the last second is going to be a nightmare.

Yet as much as your department wants to plan its offerings, there are times when faculty need to think primarily of themselves. You shouldn't feel badly about leaving because you're worried that your department will lose your tenure-track position. Whether your job is going to be filled by a tenure-track hire or an adjunct faculty member is no concern of yours when you're gone.

If you are an adjunct instructor, you should particularly resist worrying about your colleagues, because so few of them have worried about you over the years. "By devaluing the Ph.D. as a credential for college instruction," writes Trevor Griffey in an important essay published by the Labor and Working Class History Association in January, "college administrators have massively expanded the supply of job candidates, thereby allowing them to reduce teaching salaries to poverty wages."

But administrators are not the only people responsible for that particular problem. Professors who teach in doctoral programs when their graduates have poor prospects for academic employment at a living wage bear just as much responsibility as the administrators who welcome the tuition dollars that those graduate students will pay for their impractical educations. Your professors were probably more worried about their own interests when they admitted graduate students into their expensive preparatory programs for a declining profession, so you shouldn't feel at all guilty for trying to keep your head above water the best you can once you've entered it.

So if I feel this way about loyalty, why I have stayed at one institution for so long?

Luck mostly. I was lucky enough to get a job on the tenure track, but unlucky later because something better has not yet come along. Another important reason that I've stayed in one place is a general desire to avoid the kinds of gamesmanship that come with constantly trying to move up the academic job ladder. What I know from friends who've taken that path: It's really exhausting — physically, mentally, and spiritually.

But, yes, loyalty has also been involved in my decision to stay. While I have no loyalty to "the system" at my university, I have loyalty to the tangible institutions that I've helped to create here. I also have loyalty to my community and the historical endeavors which I've had a hand in building over time.

It's no secret in my department that I've filled out a few job applications in recent years, but if I do spend the vast majority of my career at one institution it won't be a disaster. The disaster will be if, in the future, even more professors no longer have that option.