

Editorial

The tenure system—protector of academic freedom or the dinosaur of academia?

There is no doubt that the system of awarding tenure to university faculty is a valuable tool in protecting academic freedom. However, there is also no doubt that tenure leads, on the part of some faculty members, to the shirking of the responsibilities of liberty associated with the privilege of tenure and to long-term semiretirement. The type of retirement that lasts until the real thing.

The award of tenure at a university is the ultimate reward for service and scholarly activity. The person to whom tenure is awarded is given a lifetime job at the university and essentially can only be terminated for criminal activity. Tenure, however, is a privilege, not a right.

Two goals of many university faculty members are to reach the rank of professor and to gain tenure. Tenure, it is felt, grants job security against the whims of a new chairman or dean, and it grants academic freedom to pursue research and scholarly activity in any direction. So far so good.

Unfortunately, human nature being as it is, the award of tenure, while a big plus for the individual, ends up being a big minus for the institution (and therefore society). It is a big plus for the individual because he or she is guaranteed employment for life until retirement or death. It is a big minus for the institution because some people see tenure as an opportunity to work as little as possible. Low productivity is not grounds for termination.

I have seen people awarded tenure for essentially political reasons. I have seen people, once tenure has been awarded, embark upon a long sleep. It cannot be called hibernation, because these people seldom, if ever, awaken from this sleep, at least until it is time to retire. How can young faculty members be inspired to greater levels of achievement when they have in front of them a wall of old driftwood that simply will not float away with the tide? Nothing drives young, ambitious faculty members out of academics faster than seeing an impenetrable wall of old guard faculty with 20 or more years to go until retirement.

Solution 1: Mandatory retirement at age 65 should be invoked at all dental schools.

I suggest this not because I like the idea of mandatory retirement. Quite the contrary in fact, and as

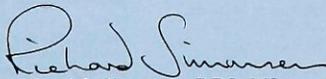
I get closer to old age, I am sure I will like the thought of mandatory retirement even less. But in a system that grants lifetime employment to its members without regard to their productivity, the way must be opened for the younger generation of academicians. Opportunities must be created for achievement of chairman status in the prime of productive careers. For those healthy and wise enough to continue productively after mandatory retirement age, a position as Professor Emeritus can be created. Certainly mandatory retirement has the tremendous benefit of getting rid of those who are totally unproductive or in fact counterproductive to progress and development of academic programs.

Solution 2: The tenure award should include periodic review for renewal, perhaps renewal every 5 years, as is practiced at the Eastman Institute in Rochester, New York.

Most people need consequences for their actions. If you give people lifetime employment, a guaranteed salary for life without review of productivity, some will immediately become nonproductive. Others may take somewhat longer to become nonproductive, while but a few will honor their commitment and continue to play a large role in the growth of the institution.

This should not be mistaken for an attack on senior faculty per se. We have many distinguished persons in our institutions who have remained productive and are vital to the success of the university and to development of new knowledge. These people, however, do not need the protection of the tenure system. These lines are aimed at those who are presently living off the system without giving a fair effort in return.

Academic freedom is an essential pillar of our democratic and educational systems. The granting of tenure is one way to guard academic freedom. However, tenure should not be granted at the expense of the survival of the academic system itself. The individual or systemic dinosaurs of academia must be eliminated or our universities will decline and decay.



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