

The Case for Tenure

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According to the American Association of University Professors (n.d.), academic tenure is an indeterminate appointment that can be terminated in only exceptional circumstances such as financial issues, program closure, or severe misconduct. Originating in the 1940s, one of the primary purposes of tenure is to ensure academic freedom, which is essential for conducting research and teaching in higher education systems (American Association of University Professors, n.d.). We propose in this report that the University continues to grant tenure to deserving faculty while developing a post-tenure performance review system.

Academic tenure is for many years now the epicenter of debate, being both defended and battled with. Perhaps the main contra argument against tenure is that it promotes a laissez-faire attitude (Finkelstein & Schuster, 2001), even though there is no quantitative evidence to support this claim (Allen, 2000). Furthermore, there are a few myths regarding tenure, and those myths often add to the controversy surrounding this topic (Diversity in Higher Education, n.d.).

Myth number 1: tenure is a lifetime appointment. Even if it may seem so, tenure it is not a lifetime appointment but rather a layer of protection for potential abuse and retaliation when speaking uncomfortable truths. Having tenure is more about the due process (i.e, presenting evidence when wanting to fire someone) than it is about a lifetime of protection. It is certainly not impossible to fire a tenured professor, and there are countless examples attesting to this (see the cases of Drs. Shannan Butler and Corinne Weisgerber, Louis Wozniak, Rick Mehta, and many more (Crowe, 2018; Flaherty, 2014; Wood, 2018)).

Myth number 2: tenured faculty do not work as hard and waste their time chasing their research interests at the expense of students. Studies have shown that full-time faculty work in average at

least 53 hours per week, with tenured faculty dedicating an extensive amount of time to teaching (Bland, Center, Finstad, Risbey & Staples, 2006). Furthermore, tenured faculty engage in higher levels of service, being involved in the community, committees, professional organizations, and more (Neumann & Terosky, 2007).

Myth number 3: almost all professors will eventually have tenure. This was never the case, and, as we will see below, the tenure percentages significantly declined since 1993. The alternative to tenure is a contract based approach that comes with a set term and minimal benefits or protection for the faculty, and students alike.

Why grant tenure?

According to the National Institute for Education Statistics, the percentage of tenured faculty across all higher education institutions decreased significantly between 1993 and 2012: a.) at public two year institutions the decline went from 56% tenured faculty in 1993 to 48% in 2012, b) at public four year institutions the percentage varied from 70% tenured faculty in 1993 to 65% in 2012, and c) at private non-profit institutions, there were 50% tenured faculty in 1993 compared to only 44% in 2012 (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). In recent years, new evidence emerged, indicating that as many as 73% of all faculty positions are not on the tenure track (Flaherty, 2018). Furthermore, these faculty positions are on a term to term basis and can be terminated at any time with very little notice (Hibel, 2013). Therefore, tenure is critical in attracting talent, in fostering stability and productivity in higher education (Allen, 2000).

Perhaps one of the most popular, and rightfully so, argument for tenure is represented by academic freedom, which “is the individual right of professors and students to engage in the production and consumption of knowledge without unreasonable restrictions.” (Blessinger & de

Wit, 2018). It is crucial to democracy, and essential not only to academics but to all citizens because it allows to anyone interested to pursue intellectual inquiry (Blessinger & de Wit, 2018). In the 19th century, once the Humboldtian model of higher education was adopted (i.e., integrating teaching, learning, and conducting research), the principle of academic freedom has become absolute and central to the process of producing and disseminating knowledge with the purpose of serving the common good (Blessinger & de Wit, 2018).

Studies have shown that granting tenure to academics not only benefits them, but it also benefits the students, the university, and the broader community. Tenured faculty are more likely and have a duty to speak on behalf of their students, to be their guiding voices and their advocates (Usher Layser, 2015). Universities with a larger number of tenured professors have higher retention and graduation rates (Sav, 2012). Lastly, tenured faculty serve on committees and hold academic administrative positions, which help move the university - and the broader community - forward (Greenwald, 2019).

Potential challenges and how they can be resolved

One common critique against tenure is that it is incredibly costly - often a million dollars potential mistake (Benjamin, 1997). However, we must note that once hired in a higher education institution, on a tenure track path, any faculty member has up to six years of probationary period before a rigorous committee eventually and perhaps decides to award tenure (Benjamin, 1997). During these six years, there are annual reviews and plenty of opportunities to make sure that this person is indeed qualified, invested in the university's mission and his/her students' success. While it is true that tenure systems have been abused in the past, this has happened mostly due to a lack of clear guidelines and inconsistent decision making (Miller,

1987). Thus, it is important to ensure that the tenure process goes through a pre-established number of clear and objective steps, such as clear policies and procedures, and alignment with institutional goals (Miller, 1987). Additionally, it is recommended that the University has a set framework for developing yearly faculty evaluations, for all faculty members regardless of their tenure status (Miller, 1987). Post-tenure faculty evaluations should be conducted to provide support for faculty development, assess merit raises or promotions, and if the case, determine the grounds for removal (Licata, 1986).

In fact, the American Council on Education, the American Association of University Professors, and the United Educators Insurance (2007) have put together a joint project called “Good Practice in Tenure Evaluation - Advice for Tenured Faculty, Department Chairs, and Academic Administrators.” This comprehensive document outlines the importance of standards and procedures for tenure evaluation, consistency in making the tenure decisions, openness and honesty in the evaluation of tenure track faculty, as well as providing advice for caring for the unsuccessful candidates and moving forward past tenure. The report is a valuable tool, available online: <http://www.uky.edu/ofa/sites/www.uky.edu.ofa/files/uploads/GoodPracticetenureeval.pdf>

By granting tenure, we expect that the University will continue to attract top talent scholars, who will drive innovation and help improve the society. Some might say that tenure is no affordable project, but if we take the example of successful higher education institutions, we will significantly contribute to uplifting the students and the community, and contribute to the generation and dissemination of knowledge as a public good. Take, for example, Arizona State University (ASU). Since 2002, when Dr. Michael Crow became its 16th president, ASU grew at unprecedented rates, launching more than a dozen of new interdisciplinary schools, research

initiatives, and innovative programs, quadrupling its research expenditures and becoming for years in a row now the top lead school in the nation for innovation (Arizona State University, n.d.; Faller, 2018). ASU is an R1 university (i.e., doctoral university with very high research activity), with 31% tenured faculty and an additional 11% on the tenure track (Arizona State University, 2018). In comparison, the national trends suggest that on average, an R1 university has 21% tenured faculty and only about 8% on the tenure track (American Association of University Professors, 2018). It is clear that ASU has discovered and promotes a system that works for the university, its students and faculty, and the broader community, a system that is completely reshaping higher education (Dumestre, 2018).

There is no doubt that tenure is needed now more than ever. College enrollment rates have been growing steadily since the 1970s yet tenure rates continue to decline (Greenwald, 2019). There are many reasons for protecting tenure, some of which we detailed in the sections above, and perhaps the most important one is the following: without tenure the faculty cannot fully perform, cannot engage in the deep knowledge seeking and dissemination, and cannot afford the luxury of calling things as they are, not out of rebellion but to advance communities and the society.

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