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Logo of joint meeting sponsored by Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología and AAAS. The design symbolizes an international gathering to consider the human condition in the Western Hemisphere and to propose improvements. See page 763.
Tenure

Academic tenure is often confused with job security. Thus it is well to start with a reminder that the basic and justifying purpose of tenure is to ensure academic freedom. Job security is an effect, an advantage, even a necessary condition, but not the purpose. However, several important changes have taken place since the twin concepts of permanent tenure and academic freedom became generally accepted: nontenured faculty members have come to enjoy about as much freedom as tenured ones; in the 1950’s and 1960’s many faculties grew lax in granting tenure too early, too generously, and to persons who did not need its protection; and a great increase in faculty size has perhaps brought about an absolute, although not a relative, increase in the number of tenured members who have gone to seed or have otherwise taken advantage of their job security.

These points are all discussed in the report* of the Commission on Academic Tenure in Higher Education, as are a number of recommendations for improving faculty decisions on the granting of tenure. The recommendations are thoughtful and timely: unless standards are tightened, the next two decades of slow growth in faculty size will be a deadening period with insufficient room for the entry of able new recruits and with faculties blocked by over-tenuring from adjusting their own ranks to maintain vigorous adaptation to changing needs.

If protecting academic freedom is the reason for tenure, then tenure should be granted only to those whose academic freedom is important to society, and on this point the commission has not gone far enough. Their model is the scholarly or research-oriented department in which academic freedom is subject to threat and in which tenure constitutes a necessary safeguard. It is not clear, however, that the policies appropriate in this case are equally applicable for all types of postsecondary institutions or that there are no good alternatives to tenure within a large and complex university.

Tenure is not needed for administrators in their administrative roles; for counselors, librarians, and persons in other supporting roles; or for certain teachers. On many a campus there are some teachers whose activities have little to do with academic freedom: members of practicing professions, who, often on a part-time basis, teach their professional skills in medicine, law, art, architecture, or other fields; and instructors in the elements of language, music, mathematics, and vocational fields. Members of these groups want status, rewards, and appropriate measures of job security, but term contracts and other alternatives to permanent tenure should be considered. One obvious danger of this suggestion is that some members of the departments involved will be considered second-class citizens. Another is that any institution that departs from current customs will limit its own recruiting opportunities. However, classes and graduations already exist, and universities are now in a buyer’s market.

The commission argues that the way to preserve the tenure system is to select more carefully those individuals whose probationary performance indicates that they merit its privileges and will honor its responsibilities. A further protection would be to narrow eligibility to those groups that truly need tenure in order to be free to make their most critical and objective contributions to students, to scholarship, and to society.—DAEL WOLFL, Graduate School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle 98105