

Whither (wither?) tenure?

The system of tenure for university faculty in the United States arose in the late 19th to early 20th centuries to guarantee that academics would not be capriciously dismissed if they conducted research on controversial topics, pursued “unpromising” research, or did not conform to conventional beliefs. Much in the world has changed in the past 100 years, from the demographics of the academic workforce and the scale of the educational enterprise, to the pace of discovery and the legal statutes surrounding retirement. These changes prompt a reexamination: Is tenure the best way to nurture scholarly growth and academic freedom, or has its cost become too much to bear?

Fortunately, the makeup of university faculty has changed over the past 100 years as well. Today, the proportion of women scientists as professors has grown. However, they are still underrepresented among tenured faculty as compared to, for example, the number of women in similar positions that do not require tenure, such as government scientists or university lecturers. A major reason is that young academics must concentrate on their careers to earn tenure at the same time as they would be starting their families, and this issue affects women disproportionately more. The year that I came up for tenure at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, I was told that no woman who had taken time out for childbirth had ever been granted tenure. My twins were born on Monday; I was back in the office on Thursday. Whether women see the tenure hurdle and opt out for family instead, or just never opted in to begin with, the result is that there are too few women for a diverse academic enterprise, and if this process does not evolve, how can the highest institutes of learning promote academic freedom and progress?

Because higher education is essential for the best employment prospects, colleges and universities have expanded to meet the demand. However, the growth has not been primarily in tenure-track faculty, but rather in

lecturers, adjunct professors, and staff who generally experience lower pay and benefits, are excluded from university governance, and survive on short-term contracts. Universities have found that this approach enables facile changes that complement the teaching staff as enrollment shifts and needs change. Nimble faculty can also change with the times, but not all tenured faculty are motivated to stay abreast of new developments. What might have

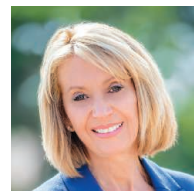
been a booming job market 20 years ago when a faculty member earned tenure may be entirely moribund now. In some countries, such as the United States, the problem of obsolescence is exacerbated by the fact that retirement is no longer mandated at a certain age. Average life expectancy has increased since tenure was first instituted. Today, tenured professors can continue to hold their positions 40 to 50 years past the date when they received tenure.

Revising the tenure system to a more flexible form of employment is not going to be easy. Those in a position to change the system are the ones who personally benefited from it. Those

hurt by the system are powerless. But it's time for universities to discuss unilateral action and institute some other mechanism. For example, promotion to associate professor could be rewarded with a longer-term contract (10 years), followed by a series of renewable 10-year contracts (or in rare cases, longer contracts) as a full professor. The contracts would be nonbinding, giving the faculty member flexibility to consider opportunities at other institutions. Such a change would encourage faculty to experience the intellectual boost that comes from interaction with different colleagues at a new university and would also facilitate institutional renewal. An appeals process (through a national university association) could adjudicate contract disputes or cases of dismissal on grounds of intellectual disagreements.

The long-standing debate on tenure has not yet resulted in any serious push to change things. At what cost?

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Science

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