

Ode to Tenure

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Academic tenure is considered to be one of the major perks of the professoriate. Many of us like to say that we are paid only half of what we are worth, but this is compensated by the fact that we get summers off and we have tenure.

What is academic tenure and how and when did it begin? The purpose of academic tenure, at least in the United States, is to give professors job security and to enable them to explore (without fear of reprisal) difficult or controversial lines of inquiry in their scholarly work. While there were inklings of tenure even during the Middle Ages, tenure did not become an issue in the United States until the mid-nineteenth century. At that time, professors were becoming sensitized to the fact that parents and others wanted to influence, and sometimes even to dictate, the nature of the college curriculum. Professors, and often their administrators, felt strongly that *they* were the ones who were qualified and able to create and administer the curriculum. They did not need help from amateurs outside of the ivory tower.

The tenure movement really got under way in the United States with the creation of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). Started in 1915, the AAUP is dedicated to the monitoring and defending of the quality of life for professors. Soon after its inception, the AAUP became a strong advocate for tenure. Interestingly, the concept of tenure got a big boost in the post-World-War-II period when so many soldiers were returning to school and there was a great shortage of university professors. Even so, many major universities did not have formal tenure policies until the 1970s.

According to the AAUP, an Assistant Professor must go up for tenure not later than his/her seventh year of service. If a clerical error is made and the candidate slips into the eighth year without tenure review, then he/she is supposed to be tenured automatically. And sometimes that happens. It is a matter that university administrators worry about quite a lot. Nobody wants a lawsuit with the AAUP.

University administrators think in terms of money, and tenure is a bankable idea. If I am a Dean and today I tenure Professor X, then that is going to cost me at least \$5 million over the years. How do I figure? Well, the salary and benefits over 35 years add up to that amount. So universities take tenure very seriously. Typically a tenure case for a candidate is initiated

in the candidate's department. The department collects outside letters of recommendation from top scholars at prestigious universities, it collects data on the candidate's teaching ability, and it gathers information about the person's service to the department and to the university. The department has a vigorous discussion of the case, and a vote is taken. In order for the tenure case to move ahead, the vote must be a very strong majority of the faculty. Any dissenting votes are taken *very* seriously, and must be accounted for. Some departments (and schools) require a unanimous vote.

It is the Chair of the Department who puts the tenure case together and forwards it to the Dean. At many universities, including my own, the Chair has the power and the right to veto a tenure case and not send it on. In fact, when I was Chair, I should have vetoed the first tenure case that I handled. But I was inexperienced and I did not. What are the considerations here? It sometimes happens that a department will tenure someone just because they like him/her. The person seems to be a good teacher and a good citizen and the research looks OK so what the heck? But the Chair can see further and realize that putting a weak case up to the Dean will weaken the department and risk the failure of future tenure cases. And that is why the Chair has the veto power.

If in fact the Chair decides to send the case ahead, then the Dean and the Dean's tenure committee examine the case. These are smart people who can quickly get to the heart of the matter and see any weaknesses in a case. In the hearing with the Department Chair they will ask a lot of hard questions, and they will be tough in their deliberations. In the end, the Tenure Committee makes a recommendation to the Dean and the Dean renders a decision.

The next step is the Provost. Whereas the Dean and the Dean's Committee will have examined all aspects of the case (including particularly the research), the Provost looks not at the research but at the softer aspects—particularly at the teaching. When I was at Penn State there were a number of scientifically deserving cases that got shot down at the Provost's level because it was perceived that the candidate could not teach.

Finally the case goes before the Board of Trustees and the Chancellor. In most instances this is a formality. The Board of Trustees consists of businesspeople and civic leaders. They certainly cannot evaluate the scientific merits of a case, and they do not know much about teaching or academic service. So they generally accept the recommendation of the Provost.

We did have a case at my university about forty-five years ago of a Biology candidate who was a very strong scientist. He had no trouble getting the

tenure mandate from his Department, from the Dean, and from the Provost. The trouble is that he was a Communist. He had worked in the sugar fields with Fidel Castro. And the Trustees took umbrage with this situation. They did *not* want to give him tenure. In the end the Chancellor stared down the Trustees and said, “If you do not give this man tenure then you will be looking for a new Chancellor.” And that was the end of that story.

Every university has a *Tenure Document* that lays out the chapter and verse of what tenure is, how you get it, and how you can lose it. Few faculty members have ever seen this document, but it is available to one and all. It clearly governs our lives in decisive ways, and we should all become familiar with it.

It is natural to ask what are the criteria for tenure. Most any Tenure Document will tell you that these are research, teaching, and service. And often the veiled implication is that these three factors are weighted equally in a tenure decision. But anyone who has been around universities for a while will know that this is not so. Research counts *a lot*—often much more than teaching and service. Even at schools where teaching is the primary faculty activity, research plays a notable role in the tenure decision. I am happy to say that, in modern times, teaching is playing an ever more prominent role in tenure decisions (in former times it did not). For instance, a poor teacher simply could not get tenure at my university today. Service plays a small role, but not a very significant one. The reason that research counts so much towards tenure is that the reputation of a university depends not on the quality of its calculus teaching, but rather on the academic profiles and achievements of its faculty. Harvard and Princeton are not prominent universities because of their teaching, but rather because of the distinguished scholars on their faculties. Lots of people are not very happy with this description of how things are, but it is accurate.

These days, if you go on the Internet and read about tenure, then you will learn that tenure is under close scrutiny, and sometimes even under attack, at many universities. The general perception is that tenured faculty are not pulling their weight. The perceived “academic risks” that tenure is supposed to protect against do not really seem to be there. There is at least one public university where they considered changing a faculty member’s tenure from “tenure to the university” to “tenure to the department.” That way, if the department is eliminated, then the candidate can be fired. There is another prominent public university where they modified the Tenure Document so that, whereas it formerly read “a faculty member can lose tenure for these

specific reasons,” now it reads “a faculty member can lose tenure for any reason that we are able to cook up.” There are some prominent medical schools that have eliminated tenure. In England, Margaret Thatcher completely eliminated tenure at the universities. A British friend of mine got tenure on day N and then lost it, thanks to Thatcher, on day $N + 1$.

There have been some notorious cases in recent years that called tenure into question. Ward Churchill of the University of Colorado achieved instant notoriety by alleging that some of the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks were “little Eichmanns.” There was a great hue and cry against Churchill and in the end he was fired—not for his inflammatory statement, but rather for other academic dishonesty. Lawrence Summers, President of Harvard, got into trouble for asserting that the under-representation of women in science and engineering could be due to a “different availability of aptitude at the high end,” and less to patterns of discrimination and socialization. He did not lose his tenured position, but he had to resign the Presidency. There are in fact well-known plagiarists who still hold their tenured faculty positions.

In the old days, when a tenure-track position was vacated, there was an understanding with the Dean that certainly that person would be replaced. In particular, if an Assistant Professor did not get tenure, then the department was guaranteed to get the position back—this to ensure that the department would not tenure a weak candidate just to retain the position. Unfortunately, with the infusion of business values into universities, and with the overall atmosphere of budget cuts and belt-tightening, such assurances are no longer in place.

At many schools now (thank God not my school, which is a wealthy private one), there is a tendency to cut down on the number of tenured positions and increase the number of temporary positions (not even postdocs, but rather part-timers). Of course this is done strictly for financial reasons. Because part-timers do not have offices, they do not use staff time, they do not use supplies, they do not have benefits (health insurance, retirement, etc.), and they have a quite low pay scale (in fact they are usually paid by the course). [The really sad part is that the part-timers are often very good teachers—better than the tenured faculty! This because their teaching activities are the big thing in their lives, and they really want to do a good job.] A result of this is that many American schools are headed towards a European model—where you have a small core of permanent faculty surrounded by an army of temporary faculty. Of course it is the permanent faculty who design and maintain the curriculum and who represent the essence of what the

department is about. So they are critical. The part-time faculty contribute very little that is of lasting value; but they ensure that a lot of basic courses that nobody else wants to teach actually get taught.

As a mathematician, I have rarely been in danger of getting myself into trouble for either exploring or voicing dangerous political or social beliefs. The closest I ever came was when I wrote an (now famous) essay criticizing fractal geometry. While my essay garnered considerable international attention, and while some people disagreed with it vigorously, I can say with confidence that my tenure was never called into question. And I still have it.

Nowadays a number of universities have put into place a system of post-tenure review. This means that, every five years or so, tenured faculty are put through the same sort of screening that a tenure candidate experiences: what has this person been publishing lately, how is his/her teaching, what kind of service has been performed, and so forth? It is rare that a faculty member will, as a result of such a review, be threatened with loss of tenure. More common is that the faculty member will receive a punitive raise, an increased teaching load, extra service duties, a decrease in amenities, or possibly even a salary reduction.

Some top universities now even give competence exams to tenured faculty. By law they cannot give exams just to the old guys—they have to give the exams to everyone. So here you are 55 years old and you have to demonstrate that you still know the chain rule and partial fractions. It is all rather humiliating, and it is not clear how much good it does.

Speaking as a prominent academic who has enjoyed tenure now for 34 years, I can say that I do not think about tenure from day to day. But it gives me a certain confidence and poise and *savoir faire* to know that I have this encomium, and that society has given me this blessing. I like to think that I earn my tenure every day, and that I deserve it. But I also acknowledge that it is a special privilege, and one that we need to keep earning in order to be worthy of it.