

Argument for Tenure in the American Higher Education

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Abstract: The article presents the arguments concerning tenure in academic institutions. Proponents of tenure argue that it protects professors from social sanctions such as criticism by political or religious powers outside campus that may disagree with the professor's research findings and thus might pressure the institution to fire him or her. Opponents of tenure argue that the security that comes with tenure allows professors to become incompetent and slothful. After assessing the advantages and disadvantages of tenure, this article concludes that tenure could be an incentive attracting competent faculty members and allowing them to embark on long-term, risky research projects.

Keywords: tenure, academic, security, incentive, research

Introduction

Academic tenure is defined by De George (1997) as " a prize that a faculty member gets after six years of probation and that one then has for the rest of one's career" (ix).The idea behind tenure is that it gives faculty members the intellectual freedom to devote attention to controversial issues without having to worry about repercussions such as getting fired. Tenure also protects the faculty member from social sanctions, such as criticism by political or religious powers outside the campus that may disagree with the professor's research findings and thus pressure the institution to fire him or her. It allows faculty to report the results of their research or explorations without fear of censure. Additionally, tenure is a privileged position which liberates a professor from the undue influence or constraints of his or her advisor, under whose supervision junior faculty members remain.

Attainment of the position of tenured professor usually involves national recognition, as a result of publishing papers, books, and giving presentations during the tenure evaluation cycle, during which the faculty member's goal is to develop his or her name and demonstrate prowess within his or her discipline. The goal is to ensure that people outside the employing educational institution know this individual's work, and by extension the university with which he or she is associated. As such, tenure is

theoretically awarded in recognition of the candidate's outstanding accomplishments that will or already have ostensibly led to human progress.

Discussion and Analysis:

In the process of determining tenure, the committee must address the epistemological question of, "What then?" Will the newly tenured professor continue to produce the same or a better level of research, vitality, teaching, and contribution, or will he or she exemplify what Henry, J.B. termed "the tenured professor syndrome?" This is seen as a condition in which "diligence and enthusiasm for research begin to wane; a lack of aggressiveness and commitment to teaching. . . [and] availability declines. . . . [T]he most devastating impact of this syndrome is the inevitable and irreversible evolution of adverse effects on other faculty members, particularly junior faculty" (Henry, 1980, p. 450).

In *The Case Against Tenure in Medical Schools*, Petersdorf, R.G. (1984) remarks that the fierce competition among junior faculty members for a very limited number of tenure slots causes a sense of collegial mistrust and ultimately has negative consequences for students' learning. Economist Levitt, S. D. argues against tenure because "it distorts people's effort so that they face strong incentives early in their career and very weak incentives forever after (leading to precipitous decline evermore)" (*Freakonomics of Tenure*, 2007, PB 4.). He contends that tenure encourages faculty slothfulness and the protection of incompetent teachers who devote steadily reduced amounts of time to classroom preparation. He saw the idea that tenure protects professors who are pursuing "unpopular" works as "ludicrous" because "if one institution fires an academic primarily because they don't like his or her politics or approach, there will be other schools happy to make the hire (of course, in case if tenure is gotten rid of)" (*Freakonomics of tenure*, 2007, PB 4.). Additionally, Levitt argues this protection of tenure seems to be redundant, since the Constitution and institutional policies are sufficient to secure the freedom necessary to pursue truth. Conversely, Rosovsky defends tenure as being necessary to ensure unfettered academic discourse. He claims opponents of tenure show unawareness of the "long history of professorial persecution for naked political reasons . . . [such as] the ravages of McCarthyism and other kinds of witch-hunts" and the tendency of conservatives, in a trend established with Socrates, to regard university professors "as corrupters of youth" (Rosovsky, 1990, p.180). Nevertheless, Wallerstein (1971) argues that contrary to the stated objectives of tenure, tenured professors are actually less likely to engage in unconventional or controversial research. Wallerstein alleges that tenured professors become less creative and bold in their work and increasingly unwilling to take "moral risks" in controversial views; such professors epitomize the notion that conformity with convention and orthodoxy, a "professional stuckness," becomes the norm. To top it off, this camp calls for the outright abolition of tenure, replacing it instead with a system that allows a periodic evaluation of competence.

Despite the contention that tenure leads to a decline in the faculty members' productivity and motivation to remain in the forefront of their respective disciplines, the sense of job security conveyed by tenure liberates them from living in constant fear of losing their jobs. Clearly, such uncertainty ultimately mitigates a teacher's effectiveness since worries about abrupt dismissal and lack of corporate support can become overwhelming. Evidence of this can be found in the situation in which professors who applied for teaching positions at Florida Gulf Coast University despite their knowledge that tenure

was not part of the deal; once they were hired, those professors complained that the amorphous employment system offered no job security at all, and this ultimately led to a steady attrition of qualified faculty. At this particular institution, professors' contracts are to be extended automatically as long as they are doing a good job. Wilson, R. notes, "As it stands, even if a faculty member receives strong evaluations, administrators can get rid of the professor without explanation." Three professors said they had been dismissed after clashes "with administrators over issues unrelated to their job performance" (Wilson, 2000, PA 18). As a result, the professors involved feared that one misstep could cost them their jobs (Wilson, 2000). This sense of insecurity fueled resignations and made it hard to attract new professors. Professor Roger Green, who led the faculty panel that evaluated the contract system, says:

When you're trying to recruit new faculty, this is the first thing that comes up. . .if you have a system in which it is perfectly legal to just not renew someone's contract. . .even under the best of circumstances[,] there is a high level of uncertainty and potential for abuse. (PA 18)

Accordingly, one can argue that tenure liberates professors from having to rely on the goodwill of administrators. As a result, it is an important factor in drawing teachers into academia. Moreover, tenure is deserved by those who have invested and continue to invest tremendous effort in mastering and furthering knowledge of their disciplines. Such individuals are fueled by the passion they have for their academic pursuits and have already forfeited the financial gains they might have amassed—especially toward their retirement savings—had they become involved in industry (or other profession) immediately after graduation. More importantly, professors seek tenure because the esoteric nature of their jobs can decrease the market value of their skills. Indeed, their specialization in narrow foci may not have corresponding opportunities in the traditional marketplace. Thus, they are committed and competent individuals in their given fields, and they have demonstrated their aptitude and dedication through their sophisticated academic accomplishments. It is, therefore, undeniable that tenure will help professors perform better, since it gives them the freedom to reinvent themselves, to learn and transmit their knowledge to students, to remain engaged, and to become even more creative, all of which is quite the opposite of professional stagnation. Consequently, these tenured professors become extremely valuable resources to the school and to the students; tenured professors ultimately become the institution.

Furthermore, Tenure is an empowering situation that allows the faculty member to pose arguments and make decisions that might be too dangerous if he or she were not tenured. Hence, tenure has also become important in the politics and "housekeeping activities" associated with running the institution, especially in matters of department hiring. N. Gregory Mankiw of Harvard University notes, "senior hiring is done by existing senior faculty. If those faculty members could start firing one another, the political dynamics of hiring would become complicated and probably untenable" (*Freakonomics of Tenure*, 2007). In important ways, faculty members determine how the educational process is provided and who provides it, as well as the methodology related to productivity is evaluated. Additionally, tenured faculty members can continue to improve the institution by selecting new recruits who are even more capable than they are, without having to worry about losing their jobs. Absent such tenure, it is possible faculty members could choose recruits who are inferior in order to

protect their jobs (McKenzie, 1996). Tenure, Rosovsky (1990) convincingly argues, creates a tight bond, a familial relationship between the professor and the institution. The process of granting tenure is comparable to the rite of passage towards inclusion. It is a hard process of internal discipline. Rosovsky reminds us that the criteria used by the institution to grant tenure essentially define the university's excellence. Outstanding faculty members are entitled to the position of tenure because through their diligence, they have become the bearers of tremendous new ideas, the champions of different approaches to the constant betterment of mankind, and the purveyors of new ways of regarding things. In addition to being a privilege, tenure is an efficient way of preserving and nourishing the professors' important talent and expertise. Without it, a faculty member can simply be discarded after seven years of employment, thus forcing him to seek a position at another school or worse, retreat from academic life. In the long run, without the policy of tenure, the university loses its cohesion and identity.

Conclusion

To conclude, critics of tenure founded their arguments on the grounds that tenure protects professors from losing their jobs, thus leading them towards incompetence and slothfulness; however, advocates of tenure's abolition are oblivious of the serious repercussions associated with its rescission. If tenure were abolished, newly recruited faculty members would never reveal their full potential due to the absence of incentive to demonstrate a mastery of their discipline. Unwillingness and lack of enthusiasm to embark on long-term and risky research projects would become the norm, and those involved would serve only to parrot standardized research topics and teaching methodologies. Rather than seek engaging careers in academia, the lack of tenure would encourage an exodus of professors who are en route to industry, where they can market their skills with much greater success. The faculty of an educational institution plays a crucial role in forming its policy; and without tenure, the administration would compromise its reliance on faculty members regarding considerations such as decision making. Clearly, this situation would produce the exact formula for inferiority.

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