

EDITOR'S CORNER

Academic Tenure

In the spring each year across the nation, a group of professors is waiting anxiously for probably one of the most important decisions of their lives — academic tenure. “Tenure granted” almost means lifelong job security at a university. “Tenure denial” is almost like a death sentence in the academic community. People not in academics may not realize the impact of tenure on the entire academic system as well as on the individual professors affected by this decision. I will try to shed some light on the subject based on my experience of almost 30 years in academics.

What is Academic Tenure?

The basic reason for having a tenure system is to protect academic freedom of expression. Without the protection of tenure, some professors, especially the younger ones, are reluctant to argue against a prevailing theory or opinion, thus inhibiting intellectual progress of the topic under investigation. Theoretically, academic freedom among all professors would encourage and allow vigorous debate and, hopefully, result in a new discovery, a bold development, or more sound and better solutions of some scientific or philosophic issues. A tenured faculty member should have no fear of repercussion in expressing an opposite opinion in academic debate. With this protection, tenured professors are seldom dismissed from the university, except for extremely unusual circumstances. In a practical sense, a tenured professor has lifelong job security in the granting institute.

Who Qualifies for Tenure?

This is a hard question to answer. Every academic discipline has its own set of rules about the qualification of the individual for tenure. A person granted tenure without problem in one institution may have a hard time in another and vice versa. There is an intricate interplay of personality and academic issues between nontenured and tenured professors in each academic unit until the very last moment of a tenure decision. The professor up for tenure must demonstrate unquestionable excellence in teaching, research, and other signs of productivity and, in some cases, compatibility with the long-term goals of the academic unit.

What Are the Procedures for a Tenure Decision?

By convention, a “tenure-track” professor has a maximum of seven years as a probationary period before permanent employment. Thus, at the beginning of the

sixth year a professor up for tenure will submit a detailed dossier about his/her performance up to that point to the faculty, and a decision will be made at the end of the sixth year. If the person is granted tenure, then beginning in the seventh year, the person will become a tenured professor. If the decision is negative, then the person will have one more year of employment and will have to leave the institution at the end of the seventh year.

Of course there are many exceptions to the rule. Some people may have a few years of “credits” from work in other educational institutions, government, or industry. In some situations, such as a new dean, a department head, or a distinguished professor, an outstanding person may be granted “Instant Tenure”—a rare occurrence.

The sequence of events leading to a tenure decision goes like this:

1. Candidate hands in a complete dossier.
2. Departmental tenured faculty members vote on the candidate.
3. Department Head, who may or may not agree with the vote, recommends to the Dean.
4. Dean recommends to the Provost.
5. Provost recommends to the President.
6. President recommends to the Board of Regent.
7. Positive or negative tenure decision is made.

The key to a positive tenure decision is the vote of the Department Head. If that vote is negative then the chance of tenure is almost nonexistent. However, a negative decision can occur on any step up the ladder!

Life after Tenure Decision

For those lucky ones who received a positive tenure decision, it means lifelong job security and a promotion. The new associate professor will be happy as a lark and usually buys a new house or a new car or has a new baby. For those who received a negative tenure decision, it is absolutely devastating to his/her academic career. I know one who became a mountain man, another who went into the restaurant business, and a few who became consultants, but most moved to a similar discipline in government or industry settings. Some die-hard academics looked for opportunities in other educational institutions. This route is usually hard but not impossible. The person will have to accept another round of assistant professorship and go through another round of the agony of tenure decision. I do know some people who overcame adversity to become brilliantly successful at another institution.

Future of the Tenure System

With all the positive sides of the tenure system, there are also negative sides, such as denying tenure to a qualified professor due to discrimination or other factors besides academic excellence, difficulty in motivating some tenured professor to excel further, or misuse of the power of the system against nontenured professors. There is talk of abolishing the entire tenure system in education. I seriously doubt this will happen from the grassroots. No sane, tenured professor is willing to vote to abolish this cherished privilege!!

My wife heard someone say at a party “When you have tenure, you don’t need it. It is only when you don’t have tenure that you need it.” There may be some truth in that statement.

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