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INFRASTRUCTURE

Tenure and the Future of the University

Dan Clawson

The fundamental rationale for the tenure system has been to promote the long-term development of new ideas and to challenge students' thinking. Proponents argued more than 60 years ago that tenure is needed to provide faculty the freedom to pursue long-term risky research agendas and to challenge conventional wisdom (1). Those arguments are still being made today (2) and are still valid. However, a 30-year trend toward privatization is creating a pseudo-market environment within public universities that marginalizes the tenure system. A pseudo-market environment is one in which no actual market is possible, but market-like mechanisms (such as benchmarking and rankings based on research dollars, student evaluations, or similar attributes) are used to approximate a market.

Thirty years ago, state and local governments put in \$3.99 for every dollar that students and parents paid for higher education; today, states put in \$1.76 for every dollar, less than half what they contributed a generation ago (3, 4). This increased pressure on budgets is arguably the most important factor pushing universities to replace long-term, full-time, well-paid faculty with poorly paid, unbenefited, contingent faculty. Core tenure-system faculty—that is, full-time assistant, associate, and full professors—were roughly 55% of all faculty in 1970, 1975, and 1980, but then declined to 41% in 2003; by another data set, tenure-system faculty were 31% of all faculty in 2007. This change in composition took place even as the absolute number of full-time faculty increased from 369,000 in 1970 to 676,000 in 2005 (5, 6).

The move away from tenure has two components—a rise in part-time faculty, especially at community colleges and non-selective institutions, and a rise in full-time non-tenure-track faculty, especially at doctoral degree-granting institutions. The biggest shift is in part-time faculty, who went from 22% of all faculty in 1970 to 49% in 2007 (5, 6). The shift to non-tenure-system faculty has taken place in both pri-

vate and public institutions and at all levels from research universities to community colleges.

Part-time faculty are most prevalent at community colleges (67% of all faculty) and least common at public doctoral institutions (22%) (7). Community colleges often prefer part-time instructors who are themselves practitioners with full-time jobs in the community. At doctoral institutions, full-time non-tenure-track faculty, not part-timers, are the prevalent auxiliary instructors. In the fall of 2003, among newer full-time instructional faculty at doctoral institutions, 32.8% of the male faculty and 47.7% of the female faculty were not on the tenure track (8) (see chart, right). More generally, the gender disparities are substantial: Among full-time faculty, women compose 33.9% of tenured and 48.9% of non-tenure-track faculty (6). Women also make up 47.9% of part-time faculty (5).

Scientific paradigms shift, and student thinking is stimulated, when dissidents take unpopular positions—unpopular not just with the public, but also with administrators and faculty colleagues. People are much more likely to buck the tide if they know their jobs are secure. Cutting costs by cutting tenure means that a smaller proportion of faculty have the structural conditions needed to challenge conventional thinking.

The arguments against tenure are compelling to those who support a world where university “presidents have become CEOs” and “the administration has become management,” as described by Richard Chait, professor of higher education at Harvard University (9). He was an adviser to Minnesota’s Board of Regents in what Chait reports was “widely construed as an initiative to eliminate tenure” (9), and he reviews tenure-skeptic arguments as follows:

- “Lifetime job guarantees border on being immoral” according to James Carlin, “a businessman for over 35 years” and the

Tenure has been eroded by structural pressures, but remains vital to universities that value creativity.

former Chair of the Board of Higher Education of Massachusetts (10).

- “Tenure inhibits the strategic reallocation of resources” (9).

- “The public perception that tenure protects ‘deadwood’ is, alas, correct,” wrote Donald Kennedy (11), former president of Stanford University. “From the perspective of many trustees and administrators,”

Chait notes, tenure “limits management’s capacity to replace marginal performers with demonstrably or potentially better performers” (9).

- “The tenure system is inflexible and limits administrators’ ability to improve schools and departments” according to 83% of the business executives surveyed (12). Trustees believe that tenure creates “an unacceptably potent buffer against centralized initiatives.... Tenure weakens the relative authority of executives (9).”

Other arguments against tenure come from non-tenure-system faculty themselves. I have been told by non-tenure-track faculty that their jobs would not exist if many faculty did not think it beneath them to teach writing. Some tenured faculty have, in effect, cooperated in promoting the rise of non-tenure-track faculty, sloughing off those parts of the job (such as advising) that they find least appealing.

The top-down business model of the university presents the need to cut costs as the primary reason to hire part-time and non-tenure-track faculty. This is, however, misplaced: The dramatic increase in tuition and fees is not driven by an increase in the costs of full-time faculty. Since 1970, after adjusting for inflation, real full-time faculty salaries have increased by 5.0%, almost all of that rise due to the aging of the faculty (salaries went down for assistant and associate professors, and went up only 2.8% for

Faculty distribution in higher education (23).

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full professors, but there are now more full professors). Tuition and fees, however, rose by 125% at public institutions and 253% at private institutions, in real (inflation-adjusted) dollars (13). Tenure is not what is driving rising costs.

The shift away from tenure has ramifications for the fundamental social principle on which universities are organized—professionalism. Professionalism operates on the basis of people who develop both expertise and a set of values and commitments (14, 15).

Professionals treat each other as peers and are accorded a considerable degree of self-governance. The idea of professionalism is that professionals cannot be properly evaluated by those from the outside and that professionals can be trusted to evaluate and police themselves, operating not on the basis of self-interest but rather with a vision of some larger good. This is the logic, for example, behind peer review by journals or the practice of faculty making the primary decision of whether or not someone deserves tenure. Professional control, however, gives faculty the leverage to resist efforts to alter the university in response to market logic; for example, at York University, tenured faculty led a campaign to limit online courses (16), and at the University of Massachusetts Amherst faculty won a commitment to restoring the number of tenure-system faculty (17).

The average tenure of a provost is 5.2 years and of a president 8.5 years (18), but many faculty stay at one institution through their entire careers. Just as the business model of recent years focused on short-term profits and stock prices and just as executives made huge bonuses based on illusory success, so too administrators may be concerned with being able to show a short-run accomplishment that will help them get the next job at some other institution, even if their actions undermine the long-run values and strengths of the university.

But I, and other faculty I have discussed this with, believe that a university is not supposed to be a business; viewing it as one shows not hard-headed realism but a failure to understand what gives the university its strength and potential. Tenure-system faculty are a problem to administrators and trustees precisely because tenure-system faculty have an alternative vision of the university and the power to act on that vision.

When administrators respond to trustee and larger societal pressures to cut costs, it typically involves a model in which most faculty engage in “content delivery,” not educa-

tion. If faculty are teaching to the test, delivering a standard curriculum determined from above, with little or no ability to explore alternatives or to respond to student interests, then a de-skilled and vulnerable workforce has important advantages. This may help to explain why tenure is weakest at community colleges and virtually nonexistent at for-profit institutions (9, 19). A market-style model works less well if a university’s goals are free speech, creativity, research, and student exploration of alternatives.

Tenure-system faculty produce better outcomes: A study, based on 30,000 student transcripts, found that first-year students were less likely to return for their sophomore year if their large introductory classes were taught by part-time faculty (20). A study of community colleges found that students were 4% more likely to transfer to a 4-year institution for each 10% increase in the share of tenured faculty (21). Although contingent faculty may be excellent teachers, typically they do not have the continuity and institutional supports that enable them to provide mentoring. If contingent faculty do not have offices, it is hard for them to hold office hours; if they are gone a year later, students have trouble getting letters of recommendation.

Certainly the situation is a complex one, and it would be naïve to say that the current tenure system is perfect in all ways. However, despite the best efforts of administrators and trustees, tenure remains a crucial part of any attempt to have a first-rate college or university.

When faculty have a choice, they strongly prefer jobs in the tenure system; offered hypothetical alternatives, faculty choose the tenured position even if it pays less (22). Perhaps paradoxically, for faculty committed to the “knowledge and learning” model, rather than the administrator and trustee “bottom-line” model, the commitment must be not only to increase the proportion of tenure-track faculty, but also to improve conditions for contingent faculty. If non-tenure-system faculty were paid reasonably, received benefits, and had job security, administrators would have less incentive to replace tenure-system faculty with (no longer quite so) contingent faculty. The future evolution of the system may include the emergence of unions or professional associations to provide nontenure faculty a more limited version of the protections offered by tenure. At my own institution, for example, the faculty union presented simultaneous campaigns to win both a net increase of 250 tenure-track faculty and

improved conditions and job security for non-tenure-track faculty.

The decision about tenure is also a decision about two visions of a university. A university can be seen as a business with a “product” whose offerings should be driven by student “demand,” a business that should rely on contingent faculty combined with highly paid administrators committed to “the bottom line.” Alternatively, it can be seen as a center of knowledge where students are educated (not just trained), that should be governed in significant part by tenure-system faculty with a long-term commitment to the institution and to knowledge.

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