

A LINE ON LIFE

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The Trouble with Tenure *

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Especially now that many companies are downsizing, the public is questioning why they should support **tenure**. This means that they have to pay higher tuition and taxes to support job security for university professors. However, nobody else's job is guaranteed. Tenure seems to support an "*old boys' club*" that undermines teacher initiative. Many tenure opponents claim it rewards research at the expense of undergraduate teaching. Others believe it favors white men at the expense of women and minorities.



Since 1940, tenure has been used at universities. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) supported it to preserve **academic freedom**. This is the freedom to pursue any line of inquiry without being censored, penalized or fired. However, in many universities, the emphasis was on research. Teaching was only secondary. To gain tenure, faculty members had to gain renown by publishing scientific articles in journals or books. It became a "*publish or perish*" atmosphere.

Now more professors can become tenured only after years of consistent teaching and service to the campus and community, in addition to sound research. Once they are tenured, faculty can only be fired "*for cause*." However, this process is difficult, because it requires a thorough investigation. On the other hand, nontenured faculty can easily be terminated by not renewing their contracts.

Eugene Rice, one of the researchers from the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE), found that tenure rewarded dedicated, productive professors. However, there are spiraling education costs and the need for fairness to minorities. For these reasons, tenure needs to be reformed.

Recently, four states – Arizona, Colorado, Oklahoma and Texas – drafted legislation to *abolish* academic tenure. Instead, they chose to reform tenure.

Psychologist Thomas McGovern is an Arizona State University (ASU) professor and a representative of the American Association of Psychology Professors. In January, 1996, he helped to talk Arizona's Board of Regents out of abolishing tenure. The Board saw tenure as promoting research at the expense of undergraduate teaching. McGovern argued that tenure promotes quality research *and* teaching. It preserves academic freedom, while attracting and keeping high-caliber faculty.

Rather than dumping tenure, the board sought to increase full-time contractual positions as an alternative to tenure. Even with tenure positions, there would be post-tenure reviews to insure productivity.

Now only about 64% on new faculty are in tenure-track positions. This compares to 74% previously. A popular alternative to tenure is full-time contractual positions. Faculty could be employed on the basis of 1-, 3-, 5- or even 10-year contracts. If faculty meet the teaching and research needs of the university, contracts are renewed. AAHE did a survey of 240 universities. Over 24% of them now offer such contracts.

ASU West, a new branch of ASU in Phoenix, is hiring all faculty on a full-time nontenured basis. This system prevents faculty from becoming too complacent. It also allows faculty to take time out between contracts. Then faculty are free to pursue research, have other work experiences, or just spend time with their young children.

A number of states now require periodic performance reviews of tenured faculty. Tenure review *"has exploded since 10 years ago, when only eight institutions were well known for doing it."* According to AAHE data, 29% of colleges now conduct post-tenure reviews. This ensures that faculty will continue to conduct superior research and put effort into their teaching. According to Rice, *"Faculty are going to be rewarded just as much for their teaching and professional service as their research."*

The future of tenure remains uncertain. The system will probably continue, but with a wider variety of types of faculty appointments. Rice has an optimistic view. Tenure will be just one option in a greater variety of faculty appointments. The academic arena will become more equally populated by men, women and minorities. All of them will be free to look into academic research that fascinates them the most.

At Arizona's community colleges, teaching and community service are emphasized over research.

At Arizona Western College and other community colleges in Arizona, they have always used a *"continuing contract"* system for faculty. After a three-year probationary period, with evidence of satisfactory performance, contracts are automatically renewed each year. However, in community colleges, teaching and community service are favored rather than research.

* Adapted from Bridget Murray's "Attacks on tenure lead to new standards," [*The APA Monitor*](#), May, 1996, page 46.