July 4, 2010

Tenure, RIP: What the Vanishing Status Means for the Future of Education

By Robin Wilson

Some time this fall, the U.S. Education Department will publish a report that documents the death of tenure.

Innocuously titled "Employees in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2009," the report won't say it's about the demise of tenure. But that's what it will show.

Over just three decades, the proportion of college instructors who are tenured or on the tenure track plummeted: from 57 percent in 1975 to 31 percent in 2007. The new report is expected to show that that proportion fell even further in 2009. If you add graduate teaching assistants to the mix, those with some kind of tenure status represent a mere quarter of all instructors.

The idea that tenure, a defining feature of U.S. higher education throughout the 20th century, has shrunk so drastically is shocking. But, says Stanley N. Katz, director of Princeton University's Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies, "we may be approaching a situation in which there will not be good, tenure-track jobs for the great majority of good people."

What does vanishing tenure mean for higher education? For starters, some observers say that college faculties are being filled with people who may be less willing to speak their minds: contingent instructors, usually working on short-term contracts. Indeed, the American Association of University Professors says instructors need tenure to guarantee that they can say controversial things inside and outside the classroom without being fired.

But others argue that the disappearance of tenure is actually not the worst thing that could happen in academe. The competition to secure a tenure-track job and then earn tenure has become so fierce in some disciplines that academe may actually be turning
away highly qualified people who don't want the hassle. A system without tenure, but one that still gave professors reasonable pay and job security, might draw that talent back.

Ultimately, though, the future of tenure may hinge on a different calculation: Does its absence hurt students enough in the classroom—something research has shown—that the cost savings to institutions are no longer worthwhile?

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<th>Tenure-Track Faculty Members Yield to Part-Timers</th>
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<td>Shown are national totals for all degree-granting institutions for selected years.</td>
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By Ron Coddington

The prominent shift in the makeup of the professoriate didn't occur overnight. It happened gradually, without any public endorsement or stated plan, as the byproduct of other concerns—primarily budget shortfalls and administrators' interest in gaining flexibility. Now, in whole swaths of higher education, including at many community colleges and at for-profit institutions, tenure is a completely foreign concept. And it is waning at many regional state universities and at less-elite liberal-arts colleges, as well.

But faculty members at major research universities, where tenure is still prominent, often continue to think of it as a mainstay. "We operate as if tenure is the norm, but clearly it's not," says Adrianna Kezar, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Southern California. "Believing we still have this norm has prevented people from acting. Tenured faculty across the country never mobilized to say: Wait!"

The New Normal

Twenty or 30 years ago, when tenure was, in fact, the norm, scholars used to debate its merits and what a college or university might look like without it. They studied the pros and cons of tenure and the handful of institutions that had gone against the grain and eliminated the tenure track altogether. Evergreen State College, a
liberal-arts college in Washington State, famously rejected tenure in favor of renewable contracts in 1971. And Florida Gulf Coast University was established without tenure in 1991.

Now that tenure is disappearing across higher education, you don't hear the same kind of debates. What people in higher education do talk about is whether the system that has grown over the last 20 years—heavy on adjunct professors who are paid as little as $1,500 per course—is what educators would have designed if the destruction of tenure had been more purposeful. The universal answer to that question appears to be: No.

"To think the way some of the finest higher-education institutions in the nation educate students is with gypsy adjuncts who have to teach at two to three different places, that would not have been what you would have wanted," says Ronald G. Ehrenberg, a professor of industrial and labor relations at Cornell University. "You want faculty with a vested interest in the institution."

The AAUP has for years argued for the necessity of tenure. This spring Cary Nelson, president of the association, visited Principia College, a liberal-arts institution in Illinois where there is no tenure. "You could cut the fear with a knife," says Mr. Nelson. "Faculty members are guarded, they're not making courageous decisions about what to say, what to think, and how to challenge their students." (Jonathan Palmer, Principia's president, told The Chronicle that simply isn't true. "Tenure in and of itself does not induce or allay fears of faculty members," he said. "The deep, rich conversations we seek among our students and ourselves are not tied to tenure, but to the continuing desire to stretch, liberate, and educate.")

According to Mr. Nelson, though, the biggest loss isn't what professors can't say in the classroom. It's what they don't say to the president or the trustees—or to politicians. "The president doesn't really care what you say in your World War II-history class," says Mr. Nelson. "You can say what you want to about your subject matter, but don't think you can say what you want to about the president's edicts." Indeed, what's disappearing along with tenure, say its advocates, is the ability of professors to play a strong role in running their universities and to object if they think officials are making bad decisions.
"One of the jobs of tenured faculty is to raise a lot of questions and make people uncomfortable," says Martin J. Finkelstein, a professor of higher education at Seton Hall University. "Nontenured faculty are very cautious. They want to be retained."

Vanishing tenure may be bad for students as well as teachers. A couple of dozen studies over the last decade have shown that as the proportion of professors off the tenure track rises, the proportion of students who return to college the following year and eventually graduate declines. Some researchers, like Ms. Kezar, say that may be because contingent instructors typically lack teaching resources, including offices, supplies, or professional-development opportunities.

Not everyone is mourning the decline of tenure, though. Cathy Trower, a senior research associate at Harvard University who has studied tenure for about a dozen years at the institution's Graduate School of Education, says tenure's harsh up-or-out system—and the escalating demands for research and publication at the nation's top universities—is actually driving away talented young people. "More and more men and women are saying, I don't want to be on that fast track," says Ms. Trower, who has studied 11,000 tenure-track professors at the nation's research universities. "Many are saying, This system is broken, I don't want it."

Only 70 percent of the tenure-track professors Ms. Trower studied at research institutions said they would choose to work at their universities if they had it to do over again. Another study, this one of Ph.D. students at the University of California that was published last year, showed that the proportion of men who said they were interested in faculty jobs at research institutions dropped from 45 percent when they first enrolled in graduate school to 39 percent later in their graduate-school careers. The proportion of women dropped from 36 percent to 27 percent.

Ms. Trower says it is possible to run a university with hard-working, committed scholars who are off the tenure track. "I'm outside the tenure system," she adds, "and I work really, really, hard."

**How Low Will It Go?**

As the proportion of professors within the tenured ranks dips lower
and lower each year, the question becomes: Is there a rock bottom below which the tenured ranks will not go, or will tenure eventually disappear altogether?

Professors who talked to The Chronicle say it may go as low as 15 percent or 20 percent of all instructors, and then reach a holding pattern. "I think the financial pressures are so severe that other than the selective, wealthy liberal-arts colleges and the public and private flagship research universities, tenure is just going to be a vanishing species," says Mr. Ehrenberg.

He is among the scholars whose research shows the decline in tenure is a bad thing for students. Such studies could create public pressure to bring back tenure, says Marc Bousquet, an associate professor of English at Santa Clara University. "I think we're at a crossroads," says Mr. Bousquet. "Over the past 40 years, we've seen a growing trend to misrecognize tenure as a kind of merit badge for research-intensive faculty." Meanwhile, he says, "the majority of teaching-intensive faculty have been shunted out of the tenure system." In his view, all professors should be included on the tenure track, and that's what a report on the issue by the AAUP will call for this fall.

But higher-education watchers don't hold out much hope that the numbers on tenure will turn around. "In the end, these are financial decisions, and they are very hard to reverse," says Frank J. Donoghue, an associate professor of English at Ohio State University who writes about the professoriate. "Once a university opens the door to staffing courses with adjuncts, they save so much money it's almost unthinkable for them to stop."

*Editor's note: This article, as first published, noted that a U.S. Education Department report is expected to show the proportion of tenured and tenure-track college instructors will drop below one-third in 2009. Several commentors point out, correctly, that the proportion was at 31 percent in 2007, already below one-third, and so we have changed the text to reflect the correct math for the correct year.*