May 15, 2011

Most Presidents Prefer No Tenure for Majority of Faculty

Even many leaders of private and public colleges want more long-term contracts for professors

By Jack Stripling

The deteriorating number of tenured positions in higher education is a common source of concern for faculty, but few college presidents seem perturbed by the trend.

Less than a quarter of college leaders who responded to a Pew Research Center survey, done in association with The Chronicle, said they would prefer full-time, tenured professors to make up most of the faculty at their institutions. Instead, 69 percent said they would prefer that a majority of faculty work under long-term or annual contracts.

Leaders of private four-year institutions were less enamored of tenure than were their public peers. Forty percent of leaders of four-year private colleges who responded to the survey, conducted this spring, expressed a preference for faculty with long-term contracts, while 30 percent favored tenure.

At four-year public institutions, half of the presidents surveyed said they preferred tenured faculty. Thirty-six percent preferred professors on long-term contracts.

Advocates of tenure say it is the surest protection of academic freedom, creating a system of due process in which the burden of proof is upon administrators to demonstrate that a professor's dismissal is for cause, rather than a response to controversial scholarship.

But critics say that tenure's protections make it difficult to get rid of incompetent faculty and can promote a culture of complacency among those who have attained the status.
Cathy A. Trower, an advocate of tenure alternatives who is research director at the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, said the survey's findings did not surprise her. In a tough budgetary environment, she said, it makes sense that presidents want to reduce the number of professors who "are with you until death, essentially."

But Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of the law school at the University of California at Irvine, said he believes tenure is essential and found the results of the survey "disturbing." Compared with tenure, a contract does not give "nearly the same psychological assurances that are needed for academic freedom," he said.

**Benefits of Contracts**

If a majority of presidents who were surveyed got their way, their campuses might work something like the Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering or Lindenwood University, neither of which offers tenure. When Olin opened, in 2002, all of the inaugural faculty were placed on five-year contracts. The Massachusetts college's founders said a nontenure system would give the institution more flexibility to phase programs in and out as the needs of industry demanded, said Richard K. Miller, president of the college.

"Nobody comes to Olin because they're looking for job security," he said. "People come to Olin because they're looking to make a difference."

Some professors have decided on their own to leave Olin, but the college has yet to refuse any contract renewals, said Mr. Miller, who attributes the renewals to recruiting "very good faculty."
Mr. Miller previously held a tenured position as dean of the University of Iowa's College of Engineering, and he said he had to "think long and hard" about what it meant to lead a college without tenure. While not personally concerned about losing academic freedom, Mr. Miller said, he had some initial trepidation about whether the college would exercise sufficient care in hiring professors, because the appointments were seen as less permanent.

Other potential problems for colleges without tenure include
challenges in faculty recruitment and an absence of due process for professors faced with dismissal.

After Lindenwood University abolished tenure for all faculty, in 1994, the American Association of University Professors sanctioned the Missouri university and said the removal of tenure coincided with a series of governance changes that silenced the faculty's role in educational policy, among other areas. Now under a new president, the university has made a number of changes, including the recent adoption of a process that allows faculty members to appeal nonrenewals of their contracts to the Faculty Council. The AAUP will consider removing the university from its sanctions list at its annual meeting next month.

James D. Evans, who became Lindenwood's president in 2007 and was not involved in the decision to eliminate tenure, said strong protections are now in place for professors. At the same time, he said, "I would candidly admit there is slightly more strength in the normal due process if it comes under the label 'tenure' with a capital T."

Jason D. Lively, chair of the Faculty Council and an associate professor of communications, said he likes Lindenwood's system. He called himself "antitenure."

"In many cases," he said, "you have professors locked into positions where they become complacent."

Efforts to eliminate complacency, however, may spark controversy. At Tiffin University, which spent five years on the AAUP's censure list, there is evidence that the lack of tenure has hampered faculty recruitment, said James Rovira, who has a three-year contract as an associate professor of English and is chair of Tiffin's humanities program. The past three faculty searches in the Ohio university's School of Arts and Sciences have failed, and Mr. Rovira attributes the small applicant pools to the candidates' concerns about academic freedom. Some faculty members have also said they are afraid to speak out on controversial issues, but Mr. Rovira said he was unsure if those fears were justified.

Rather than eliminate tenure, some colleges give faculty the choice of tenure or a status that comes with other benefits. Such is the case at Webster University, a Missouri institution where, since the
1970s, professors have been able to earn either tenure or "faculty-development leave" status, which allows sabbaticals every five years instead of every seven. Professors with development leave undergo a peer review every five years, and the review theoretically makes them more vulnerable to dismissal. But there is little precedent for a review's leading to termination, current faculty members say.

Bruce Umbaugh, a philosophy professor who declined tenure at Webster, said he valued the sabbatical benefits and believed that the reviews bring accountability, even if dismissal is uncommon. "We have all sorts of evidence that just knowing that people are paying attention" through reviews "changes the way people behave," he said.

**Differences in Views**

Among the presidents surveyed, those who had previously served in faculty positions were more likely than leaders who had not to say they preferred a mostly tenured professoriate on their campuses. At public four-year institutions, 52 percent of presidents who previously held faculty positions favored tenure, while just 37 percent without prior faculty experience did. At private four-year colleges, 35 percent of presidents with prior faculty experience favored tenure, compared with 20 percent of those with no faculty background.

Kent J. Chabotar, president of Guilford College and a professor of political science at the North Carolina institution, said he was not surprised that presidents with prior faculty experience would be more inclined to support tenure. "When you come to have some influence over the same system that produced you, you're going to support it," he said.

Mr. Chabotar has never held a tenured position, and he said he believes the continuity of long-term faculty appointments is more important than providing tenure.

Presidents' responses also differed based on the selectivity of their institutions. Those at highly selective, nonprofit four-year colleges were more likely to support tenured faculty positions than those at less selective institutions. The split was particularly pronounced among private institutions, where 55 percent of presidents at highly selective colleges favored tenure, compared with 18 percent at less selective institutions.
The most-tepid support for tenure came from presidents of for-profit and two-year colleges, both of which rely heavily on part-time and adjunct professors. Just 4 percent of for-profit presidents and 11 percent of two-year-college presidents favored having tenured professors make up a majority of their faculties, while more than half of those surveyed at both types of institutions preferred having a majority of full-time faculty on annual contracts.
Does this mean that those researching are only qualified to teach the topics covered in their own work? That would be extremely limiting. One does not need to be a currently practicing researcher to read, digest, discuss, and teach current topics in their field. As long as someone has sufficient course work in their area of choice, a solid graduate or professional experience that includes exposure to research and methods, and a desire to stay updated in their discipline, they can be very strong undergraduate faculty members. I would agree that strong and more current research backgrounds are important for teaching at the graduate level.

7 people liked this.  Like

I think you're getting research mixed up with content/field knowledge and qualification to teach (by keeping up with the field).

5 people liked this.  Like

Research is useful for bringing attention to the university and its reputation, but it's not necessary for teaching most classes. Do non-research-based institutions not actually teach?

2 people liked this.  Like

Oh come on. You can teach perfectly well without doing research. More likely, how can I test out my latest research on students while not teaching them anything...

2 people liked this.  Like

Actually, if you look at the bar chart, the opposite seems true, no? 30% of private, 4-year colleges favor full-time tenured faculty while 50% of presidents at public colleges do.

Like

It's funny---needing "tenure" to protect one's freedom to research topics, but not needing freedom to teach topics. Given parents today and the decrepit motives, self righteousness worshipping religiosities, and ideologic political piarapis of the current US populations, freedom to teach anything that offends this or that parent seems to be something we sorely need—but then again, perhaps it is all a waste, and better that we all must move to Asia where people WANT to think differently than they now think.

35 people liked this.  Like

Agreed. But perhaps this would be less of a concern had we not contributed powerfully to a culture
which says that everyone has the right not to be offended by anyone else’s speech or ideas. University campuses were among the first to enact draconian “speech codes.” And now we are reaping what we have sown.

opentosuggestion 2 days ago

I had not previously heard of any of these institutions that do not offer faculty the prospect of tenure. Is there a distinguished American university that does not offer positions leading to tenure? I appreciate how the use of adjuncts can muddy the picture, but for the purpose of my query I leave that aside.

WmHooper 2 days ago in reply to opentosuggestion

So, marginal quasi-for-profit institutions (Webster Univ.) and for-profit diploma mills that rely on milking federal financial aid also want a flexible semester-by-semester faculty hiring policies. This is how it used to be, before US higher education was the envy of the world. De-professionalize the faculty, and in a generation you'll get what you pay for—crap.

The accusations of deadwood and complacency are red-herrings.

triumphus 1 day ago in reply to WmHooper

The higher education factory is here.

Salvador Dalai Llama 1 day ago in reply to opentosuggestion

Actually, I don't think we can leave the use of adjuncts aside. It doesn't muddy the picture at all—in fact, it clarifies. We have an academic underclass. We need to acknowledge that. It is a fundamental part of the way universities do business.

To answer your question, many of the Ivy League schools—Harvard and Yale spring to mind—seem to be relying on “Visiting Assistant Professors.” That's what they call "adjuncts.” They offer tenure to a limited selection of their faculty, and they do indeed offer positions "not" leading to tenure—if their demographics are like other places, then it's about half the faculty.

Salvador Dalai Llama 1 day ago in reply to opentosuggestion

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goeswithoutsaying 1 day ago in reply to opentosuggestion

Well don't leave those "lesser adjunct hiring places aside." R1s hire their share of VAPs and contract Instructors, too.

Kevin Cryderman 1 day ago in reply to opentosuggestion
Why leave the question of adjuncts and lecture track aside since they teach over 50% of the courses in the US?

I value tenure, but I have seen problems with it. For one thing, I received tenure, and six months later was laid off (along with a third of my fellow tenured faculty members) by a university that had just come off the AAUP sanction list a handful of years previously. It was political - the university administration did not like the dean who had hired us all, that dean left, and everyone who had been hired in the previous ten years was axed. There was no declaration of a financial exigency. None of us had the money or the emotional energy to spend the next five years of our lives in litigation. So we all left. That firing decimated my academic career. No one will touch you mere months after you receive tenure - you are too new to GIVE tenure to in their eyes, and everyone assumes you don't want to start over. I could write a book. (Maybe I will.)

I don't think that the problem of tenure is "deadwood," frankly. I just haven't seen it. What I HAVE seen, however, is tenure abused by the tenured faculty as a way of punishing, keeping out, or threatening the untenured (tenure-track) faculty.

And you all have, too. How many times have we read within these articles and comments advice to younger faculty members to "wait until you're tenured" before they tackle a controversial problem, make what they view as a needed curricular reform, do something entrepreneurial, engage in interdisciplinary work, or focus on their teaching - even before they try to deal with misconduct in the tenured faculty?

It is not because tenured faculty grow complacent that tenure needs to be evaluated. It is because, as if often the case with human beings, the oppressed have become the oppressors.

This is one of reasons why faculty need to have real, protected, collect bargaining rights. We continually see less regard for faculty by administration and state governments in attempts at bravado by cutting costs and continuously running for office. Look at the faculty in the UW-System. I suspect Walker's next step would be to try and eliminate tenure. But this would be expected of such an ignoble college dropout. At some point in the future, hopefully sooner than later, all labor unions need to work together on an international basis to defend the rights of workers (private and public). Unions have become too complacent in the past 30 years. I know it is not likely, but wouldn't it be great if the workers of China were able to join the Teamsters... just a thought. I wonder how long American firms would take to move production out of China? Okay, I am ranting here, but let's face it, if you do not fight to regain the rights that have been eroding, tenure will gradually disappear. Ultimately who pays the highest price... students.

I think we need to be as frank as you have been about a generally neglected importance of tenure: to protect faculty from faculty!
Completely agree. There are ways of getting rid of the "deadwood".

When a President or Dean complains that tenure protects the "deadwood" what they are really saying is they are either

A) too lazy to take the steps needed to fire a legitimately poor teacher

OR

B) annoyed that they cannot fire a competent teacher on a political whim

Contracts with specific end dates seem foolish to me. If you hire someone for 5 years or even 10 years, they will spend at least the last year of their contract looking for work, like politicians when they are campaigning. Indeed, the entire contract might be spent in setting up their next job and not on making your campus thrive. Why not just hire people, expecting that they will be there for the long haul? Give everyone "academic freedom" from day one, do periodic reviews (every 2-3 years), set up due process systems for unfair termination. Very basic HR stuff.

The only reason you wouldn't want to offer an ongoing contract is so you could avoid paying unemployment when you terminate it, like a temp or maybe a consultant. If that is going to be the case, then faculty should demand, and universities should expect to pay, much higher salaries across the board, more like consultants than temps. It would be downright idiotic for faculty not to plan for unemployment, financially speaking.

I'm not sure I understand why a survey of what presidents think is, in itself, meaningful. It's unsurprising that a group that increasingly is seen as analogous to corporate CEOs believes it would be best served by "flexibility" and the ability to fire workers. If you polled the leaders of car companies, wouldn't you find the same thing? And yet CEOs represent the capitalist and share holding side of any equation; and while neo-liberal theory may hold that somehow this is what produces the best result for everyone, I think we've seen enough in the past ten years to realize that's a partial truth at best.

Its results are not surprising but the study is useful. That's because it exposes the demographic and economic causes of the rationales those for- and against-tenure trot out. Talk about "deadwood" "academic freedom" and all turn out not to mean much. The data suggest that a university president looking to make raise his institution's bottom line, or who came from within or without the professoriat will choose his position accordingly.

In short, and to return to your post, jwr12, when you make CEOs university presidents, you close the loop between what business does and what academics say it does, why and whether or not is should. That agreement, especially if not exposed for how it was created, won't leave much diversity of opinion.
Remember C. P. Snow's "The Two Cultures"?

It's not science versus humanities any more. It's administration versus faculty. Of course a majority of college presidents considers tenure either an inconvenient sinecure; none of them thinks he has or needs it (conveniently overlooking the fact that virtually every single college president enjoys what amounts to effective tenure, being able to reach out to wealthy board members and contributors to ensure the privilege of parachuting into serial executive positions or consultantships in perpetuity).

Remember when college presidents rose from the faculty?

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12071647  2 days ago

Hmmmm, let me go back to entering college 33 years ago. I spent 4 years in college, 5 years in grad school, 8 years in postdoctoral studies where I changed fields. Finally gained a tenure-track job at age 35 with a starting salary less than $50K after 17 years of post-secondary education at, what I thought, was an excellent institution. Earned tenure half-dozen years later having 40 publications and a book, but still earning about $60K. That same year Bush got elected, the new economy was touted, and universities really went industrial. So, really, 20+ years of sweat and stress for a rather low salary but academic freedom through tenure that guarantees a life of the mind.

Ok, now take away the academic freedom through tenure, allowing my institution to follow the whims of industry and government. Devote 20+ years for a rather low salary, or go into welding or plumbing at age 20 for the same salary? No-brainer.

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medieval_spectacle  19 hours ago  in reply to 12071647

Given our current overproduction of graduate students, at least in the humanities, the idea that more people might decide “not” to go to graduate school could be a good thing. If we stop over-producing cheap labor, it will make it easier to balance the equation.

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cpyry  2 days ago

What disturbs me most about this article is the complete lack of empirical evidence presented by either side. Does tenure cause a decline in performance in the classroom? What is the economic impact of presumed tenured inflexibility on students enrollment? Does tenure lead to scholarship with both higher risks and higher potential impact? Does a lack of tenure reduce the attractiveness of an institution to job applicants? All of these questions (and more) are quite testable.

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rhancuff  2 days ago

College presidents don't like tenure? In other shocking news, corporate bosses prefer non-union labor to union labor, major polluters don't like environmental regulation, and criminals don't like cops.

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archman  1 day ago  in reply to rhancuff
Ha Ha. I wish we could embed this comment in the article itself. You pretty much nail this on the head. Asking university presidents what they think about tenure, is on reflection, a no-brainer.

6 people liked this. Like

Mstrx  11 hours ago  in reply to rhancuff

Sometimes I revisit comments to re-read what I wrote. But I keep coming back, here, in this case, just to reread your comment rhancuff. It brings a smile to my face. It makes me feel good that there are colleagues like you in the world.

1 person liked this. Like

texas2step  1 day ago

Proving once again that they are CEO's, not presidents.

35 people liked this. Like

triumphus  1 day ago

One-year, renewable contracts for presidents sounds like a good idea.

78 people liked this. Like

msmbaphd  1 day ago  in reply to triumphus

I agree and while we are at it, the one year renewable contract for presidents should be voted upon by the faculty of the university.

42 people liked this. Like

eacowan  1 day ago

The purpose of having mostly tenured faculty is to give the faculty authority. The authority of the faculty gives authority to the university, and a faculty with authority essentially embodies the university itself. This has been the traditional view of institutional academe up to now. But a faculty without authority, a faculty looked upon as mere "employees" without authority, effectively denies authority to the university itself. Consequently, at least in my view, a university without a tenured majority of faculty is academically worthless and cannot be taken seriously. "Job security" as a justification for tenure is indeed a red herring. Faculty authority is what matters, and administrators who go about removing tenure will find that their institutions are not endowed with anything other than sheer numbers.

48 people liked this. Like

Mstrx  1 day ago

Perfectly fine with me! Now all they need do is to compensate faculty (fair market value) for the loss of tenure... or the market value of teaching a large classes, service on committees, advising students, writing proposals, submitting papers, conducting research, editing textbooks and papers..
When I went into this, I knew there would be no money, but there would be security. Take away the security – OK – now just give more money.

56 people liked this.  

K  15 hours ago  in reply to Mstrx

Exactly - I could go into a higher-paying job, but I stay because of the security. If there's not even security, who in the world would bother with this?

1 person liked this.  

stevesarakuhn  1 day ago

A few years ago, a colleague and I were shipped to satellite campuses forty and seventy-five miles, respectively, from the main campus. We were both tenured, respected teachers with many years invested in the college. I had been president of the Faculty Senate twice, most recently the previous year, and my colleague had been secretary. In my opinion, we were sent to other sites where there were insufficient students to support a full-time faculty member because we were vocal in questioning some of the decisions our administration had made, as we were required to do as representatives of the faculty as well as members of a faculty where faculty governance is touted. We went through all of the usual appeals and ended up suing. After an emotionally draining and time-consuming couple of years, the suit was settled satisfactorily prior to going to trial. I am certain that, if we had not been tenured, we would have been fired. In fact, I suspect we would have been fired for bringing the issues up long before we were transferred. Though one rarely reads of such cases, I suspect that in any given year there are campuses where tenure protects faculty from actions by the administration. Perhaps the protection comes in the form of preventing the action in the first place because the administration recognizes that the faculty member is protected, or perhaps it takes a suit to resolve the matter. Either way, tenure provides a useful and very important check-and-balance to an administration as well as providing security to faculty. If it is true that there are tenured faculty that are deadwood at an institution, surely through forms of post-tenure review those faculty can be discovered and appropriate action taken. But tenure is a valuable and necessary protection, not only for faculty but also for the institution itself.

40 people liked this.  

K  15 hours ago  in reply to stevesarakuhn

Steve - I don't doubt you would have been fired. I have tried to stay low at my college and still got fired - several people who do not have any experience in my area demanded I change the way I taught my class, simply because they didn't like it. Luckily my current college has a good support system - other people who teach in my area stood up and said I was teaching the class exactly how I should be and my union was able to show that even if the criteria the administration was using to try to fire me was acceptable (which it wasn't) I was still meeting the criteria, so I was unfired. I really count myself lucky - I'm actually untentured but the union and other tenured members stood up for me and pointed out how the administration was simply trying to weasel out of an agreement based on nothing.

Sometimes I complain about unions - nothing's perfect - but until the administration can show that they will honor their agreements, hold people up to reasonable and measurable standards, and compensate fairly there is no way I would give up being in one.

1 person liked this.  

cbres  1 day ago

"Nobody comes to Olin because they're looking for job security," he
said. "People come to Olin because they're looking to make a difference."

That sounds like a sound byte, not a sound argument. I agree with the person who posted that neither side uses much evidence.

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Mstrx  1 day ago

See my comment a few lines down on more money. But there is more.

One reason university presidents are paid so well, is that they must run a system that has tenure. Quite complex, that is. OK... take away tenure, Mr./Ms presidents. Make your job easier. Good, then lower your salary.

Can't these idiots see how the system fits together? Change a piece - fine by me - but there will be other consequences. And even those consequences are OK by me.