The modern American university faces declining financial support from federal and state governments, and one way institutions have saved money has been to offer tenure to fewer professors: Today less than 40 percent of U.S. faculty members are on the tenure track. At the same time, distance learning and virtual classrooms are making it possible for one professor to reach thousands of students. Additional advances in technology will stimulate new discussions about the scope and need for tenure.

In all the research and debate thus far on the merits of tenure, one aspect of it has not been studied: whether it fulfills its original justification. The key reason for tenure, espoused by the American Association of University Professors since 1915, is to ensure academic freedom — professors' freedom to teach, conduct research, and perform other duties without fear of job loss or censure. Does tenure in fact do what it is supposed to do?

Consider the case of a professor we know. While an assistant professor, she was afraid to study a topic that her past research suggested might be promising because senior colleagues who held a contrasting view of the field did not want to see rival positions bolstered. Even now, having gotten tenure on promotion to associate professor, she does not feel comfortable undertaking the research. She reasons that once she has been promoted to full professor, she will finally be free to pursue the line of inquiry without fear of angering her colleagues. Whatever happened to tenure's ensuring academic freedom — wasn't tenure supposed to liberate professors to pursue controversial ideas?

Empirical data on that topic are conspicuously absent, so — with Katrin Mueller-Johnson, now a lecturer at the University of Cambridge's Institute of Criminology — we conducted a survey to provide some (the complete study will be published in a forthcoming issue of Behavioral and Brain Sciences). Through a random sample based on institutional directories, we identified 2,700 professors of all ranks from top-rated colleges and universities across the United States, and from the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Thirty-six percent, or 961 faculty members, agreed to participate in our survey. In addition, we surveyed by telephone a random sample of nonresponders. Of the 48 faculty members we called, 43 responded, and we found that their attitudes about tenure and academic freedom matched those of the original 961 responders.
We asked the 1,004 participating professors to react to real-world dilemmas involving colleagues who wished to teach courses unpopular with their peers, to investigate unpopular topics, and to publish controversial findings. For example, one question was: "Assistant Professor B is considering teaching a new course that several of B's senior colleagues frown upon. What would the typical assistant professor in B's position do?"

For one-third of the professors completing our survey, the question referred to an assistant professor; for another third, an associate professor; and for the final third, a full professor. Equal numbers of assistant, associate, and full professors got each version of the question.

We compared how professors of a given rank believed colleagues of their own versus other ranks would behave. Our large sample enabled us to see how actual full professors said their peers would behave, for example, compared with how people at that rank were perceived as behaving by more junior colleagues.

Because we wondered if the lure of tenure and promotion impeded ethical behavior, we also asked our participants how their colleagues act when confronted with moral and ethical dilemmas. For example, how do professors respond to the knowledge that a colleague is misappropriating grant funds or having a sexual relationship with one of his or her undergraduate students?

Academic freedom should mean that professors with tenure act without fear of reprisal in the real-life situations we asked about, pursuing research that interests them, reporting unethical conduct by colleagues, and so forth. Sadly, tenure does not appear to confer such freedom.

Professors in our study were more timid than we expected, rarely confronting departmental colleagues who disagreed with the content of their research and teaching. Interestingly, everyone thought that everyone else would behave more boldly than they themselves would.

Having tenure was not associated with a greater willingness to speak one's mind or publish controversial findings. Comparing tenured associate professors with untenured assistant professors and tenured full professors revealed that the associates behaved more like their junior colleagues than like their senior ones.

The biggest increase in the tendency to speak one's mind, to teach courses unpopular with one's colleagues, to publish controversial research, and to blow the whistle on ethical transgressions came when a professor was finally promoted from associate professor with tenure to full professor. That point in a scholar's career usually comes 12 to 20 years after the receipt of the Ph.D., which means that for many years, academic freedom is stifled, or at least muted.

One happy finding in our survey was that the idea of the renegade tenured professor — often invoked during tenure reviews when someone wishes to block a candidate by
instilling fear of the person's future selfish or irresponsible behavior — turned out to be a myth. Most professors lack the moxie or desire to become renegades.

All the professors in our sample assumed that the colleague down the hall would be more likely than they themselves were to report another professor for misappropriating grant funds or having an inappropriate relationship with a student. (Interestingly, our survey revealed few disciplinary or gender differences.) In fact, some professors appear more concerned with remaining in their colleagues' good graces than they are with maintaining ethical standards.

One could argue that even if tenure does not meet its objective of encouraging academic freedom, it still helps attract a talented work force, results in higher graduation rates at colleges and universities with higher proportions of tenure-track faculty members, and protects the few who most need it — those professors who are courageous enough to teach or publish highly controversial material. But is tenure the most efficient way to achieve those goals?

Some nations that do not offer tenure still protect academic freedom, through legislation or union contracts. For example, Britain passed an education act stipulating that academics appointed or promoted after November 1987 would no longer have tenure, and professors with tenure at that time would lose it when they were next promoted. Yet the act specifies that professors can express controversial or unpopular views without fear of losing their jobs. And New Zealand law guarantees academic freedom, though tenure in that country offers less job security than in the United States.

Our survey leads us to conclude that tenure is not living up to its original promise: It does not liberate professors to exercise the freedoms of speech, writing, and action. The muzzling effect of the current system of promotion in higher education — in which even tenured associate professors refrain from exercising academic freedom for fear of derailing their chances for promotion to full professor — must be weighed against tenure's virtues, such as higher graduation rates and the recruitment of a talented work force.

The truth is that most of us walk on eggshells until we become full professors. To quote one 45-year-old friend, newly promoted to that rank, "It's great to finally be able to speak my mind at work."


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