Description

The Holy Grail of Academia

Tenure is seen as having ‘made it’ as an academic — by virtue of experience, expertise, research and authorship. It can be a long journey, lasting up to a decade and sometimes longer, with specific expectations of earning the right through frequent and extensive research publication.

In recent years, tenure has become a topic of fierce debate between academic institutions and unions, as budgetary realities force those institutions to examine the financial cost of tenure and the operational limitations. The concept of tenure has both pros and cons:

Pros

1. Job Security

Academia is not always a lucrative profession, and the promise of long-term employment is seen as a strong incentive for recognized academics to remain with the institution. Unions also argue that tenure prevents institutions from firing older (and more expensive) professors in favor of younger (and less expensive) ones.

2. Academic Freedom

The right to research without fear of influence or retribution. Advocates also argue that this empowers academics to fight for the highest standards of institutional governance without fear of dismissal in retribution for challenging institutional leadership.

3. Symbolism

Tenure is seen as the ‘brass ring’ of an academic career and conveys a positive perspective to both faculty and the institution. Colleagues see you as having ‘paid your dues,’ while the institution seeks to leverage the perception of implied quality research and governance that an enduring list of departmental faculty provides.

Cons

1. Performance Quality

Critics argue that many institutions find themselves stuck with poor performing faculty under tenure contracts. It’s impossible to fire bad professors, but the process is often extremely bureaucratic and is often steered towards a graceful exit rather than termination for cause.

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2. Budgetary Restrictions

Long-term contracts that are typically at the high-end of the institutional salary range commit institutions to salary costs that remain inflexible in the face of a changing economic climate. Critics argue that in an increasingly competitive market, it is unreasonable for students to bear the burden of older, intractable faculty when younger and more technologically competent faculty are available. The fact that those younger faculty typically cost less is, apparently, an added bonus.

3. Faculty Morale

Tenure sets up a two-tiered system against those who have yet to achieve tenure, as well as placing newer faculty under increased pressure to 'publish or perish' on the tenure track.

Time to Save This Dying Breed?

The debate over academic tenure continues to be clearly divided between institutions, unions, and their faculty membership. The harsh reality is that since tenure is typically earned over time, tenured professors are usually at the apogee of their academic careers.

As state budgets start to enforce contract changes in favor of renewable two-or-three year appointments with greater flexibility to address non-performance issues, the prominence of tenure will continue to decline.

While budgetary pressure may prevail, the academic experience that students receive may suffer in the long-term. With no incentive to remain with an institution, top-performing academics may well be available to the highest bidder, which may well lead to a new problem of faculty retention.

Category

1. Career Corner
2. PhDs & Postdocs

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