Description

What is Tenure?

Tenure (from the Latin *tenere*, meaning to hold or keep) dates back to efforts to protect academic freedom in religious schools in the 18th century.

While the preferred status and assumed job security of tenure are seen as primary career goals, tenure comes at a price—a probationary status that can last as long as a decade, and a “track” that demands extensive research publication to achieve forward movement.

Tarnishing the Brass Ring

For younger faculty experiencing the unremitting pressure to “publish or perish” on the tenure track, achieving tenure may still seem like getting the brass ring.

That ring is being tarnished by economic reality:

- The job security of tenure is disappearing, albeit after lengthy union negotiations and mediation to craft appropriate exit strategies. “Jobs for life” were always more legend than fact, but seniority no longer offers protection when budget cuts have to be made.
- Tenured faculty is coming under increased criticism for lower productivity levels compared to their younger counterparts, and an unwillingness to embrace new technologies.
- According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), only 35% of all university faculty hold tenure track appointments—25% have tenure, and 10% are probationary.

Tenure Is Expensive

The status of a tenure appointment has been criticized as nothing but a fancy title to compensate for a low salary.

In terms of faculty productivity (teaching and research), tenured professors are criticized as low performers, and the requirement to set aside salary dollars for long-term contracts creates budgetary restrictions that limit institutional performance.

Advocates have criticized the general trend of larger class sizes as a submission to quantity over quality, but as the growth of online classes have shown, students clearly value flexibility and convenience over the opportunity to sit at the feet of a ranking faculty member.

An Outmoded Concept

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A 1996 survey by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA found that 38% of faculty agreed that “tenure is an outmoded concept,” and States were quick to capitalize on that perspective.

In 1997, Oregon abolished tenure in favor of two-year renewable contracts along with a commitment to “rehabilitate” under-performing instructors. The criteria for under-performance continue to be modified as technological capacity and budget pressure grow.

Avoiding an All-or-Nothing Solution

Two-year renewable contracts have become the norm, but offer little incentive for top-performing faculty to remain loyal to their institutions. Attractive offers of research facilities and funding can produce personnel transfers to other institutions at rates that would rival professional sports franchises.

A middle-ground of 5- or 7-year contracts with rigorous assessment to maintain top-performance would address the primary complaint of poor-performing faculty being protected under tenure contracts while providing clear evidence of faculty value to the institution.

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