

The Discontinuation of Tenure in Higher Education

Carly Winetrobe

Northern Arizona University

Introduction

Tenure policies were first established on higher education campuses in the 1930s and 1940s (Wilson, 2005) and has become a very pervasive debate in higher education. Now, with the dynamic higher education environment, tenure is sometimes viewed as ““a rigid one-size-fits-all system, with hurdles that are getting tougher and tougher to clear”” (Wilson, 2005, para. 3). The tenure process can be quite perplexing. Dr. C¹, a former tenured faculty member in a STEM field at an Arizona university, explains:

Tenure is one of those mysterious processes in academia that no one seems to fully understand...It has become a very long multi-step process...invoking several different hierarchies...the only individual who has a true grasp of the entire process is the faculty member going through it...and they are usually the most confused.” (Dr. C, personal communication, February 26, 2019)

It should be noted there are positives to tenure such as economic and job security, flexible schedules, and the protection of academic freedom (Martin & Gillen, 2011; Wilson, 2005; Wicks, 2004). “As I began to get more involved in controversial research that ruffled the feathers of politicians and caused others to question the value of science in general, I began to see the value of tenure...” (Dr. C, personal communication, February 26, 2019). Perhaps one of the most compelling arguments in favor of tenure comes from the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). According to the AAUP (n.d.), tenure benefits two overarching populations--individual faculty and the common good. While these benefits are true to an extent, there are two indisputable flaws in the current tenure system: 1) lack of accessibility/inclusivity of faculty and 2) the impact of tenure on students.

Today’s world is no longer static, and higher education must do more to mirror the fluidity of these changes and support all faculty, who will in-turn better support students. This statement paper considers changing the tenure system at a public four-year Research One university to a contract model and addresses the two previously mentioned significant tenure system flaws in hopes to become more inclusive, accessible, and supportive for the institution’s faculty and students.

¹Name is intentionally left anonymous

Evidence and Examples

Changing the current tenure system to contracts will alleviate the perceived power dynamic often felt between adjunct/non-tenured faculty and their tenured colleagues (Vedder, 2018). For example, many institutions do not allow non-tenure to have a seat in faculty senate (Field, 2018). Being excluded from these governance structures can lead non-tenured faculty feeling “powerless and isolated” (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], n.d.).

In addition, contracts can help counteract the gender and racial disparities that are currently seen in the tenure system. In 2012, the median age of tenured faculty was 55 years old, and 75-80% were white males (Greenberg, 2012). Women and racial minorities are hired more frequently for adjunct faculty positions than tenured positions (Riley, 2011). Fewer women become professors and are more likely to leave those positions compared to men (Bozeman & Gaughan, 2011). Moreover, it is less common for Latinas to be hired as professors and they are not proportionally represented in faculty positions (Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014). Racial minorities are less likely to earn tenure compared to their White colleagues, especially in STEM fields. A similar trend was recently identified between Black and Latinx undergraduates. About 37% of Latinx students and 40% of Black students changed out of a STEM major, compared to 29% of White students (Bauer-Wolf, 2019). How can we expect this narrative to change and motivate minority STEM students to continue in their major when STEM-tenured professors are often not Black, Latinx, or other minority races? Sethna (2011) echoes the importance of minority faculty to support minority students. “[I]t is helpful to the social, mental, and emotional health of minority students to see faculty who look like them...it lets them know they...will succeed...” (Sethna, 2011, p.3). Finally, previous research suggests that institutions may “devalue” the research interests of minority faculty, who also receive less support for tenure and promotion (Fries-Britt, Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, Milem, & Howard, 2011).

Some opponents of tenure say that professors may be more likely to coast or become complacent once they achieve tenure (Flaherty, 2012), which begs the question--how does that lackluster approach

benefit the student? If institutions look at how many articles a professor has published (when considered for tenure), instead of considering their effectiveness as a teacher, it is reasonable to question how that approach is providing exceptional support for students (Riley, 2011). Tenured professors' true intentions also come into question as some wonder if faculty genuinely want tenure because of academic freedom or the promise of "guaranteed lifetime employment" (Wood, 2011, para. 14). Others argue that universities focus too much on research instead of exceptional teaching (Martin & Gillen, 2011).

Rationale for the Idea

There are undeniable faults in the current tenure system. While difficult, these proposed changes can help restructure tenure to become a contract-based system and ultimately help foster a more welcoming, productive environment for all faculty. A contract model will help divert the focus from "jumping through a very specific set of very small hoops [to award tenure]" (Dr. C., personal communication, February 26, 2019). As a result, these changes will positively impact students; and if a university truly cares about students, this should be motivation enough to work towards a change. Of course, changes to this system will undoubtedly create a variety of challenges.

Anticipated Challenges and Proposed Resolutions

It is likely these changes will be met with hesitation and/or contention as tenured and non-tenured instructors often have different interests and concerns (Field, 2018). There are a few proposed solutions to help manage these challenges. First, different incentivization opportunities (such as providing research and travel funds or giving accolades based on achievements) may encourage faculty members to continue/build upon their strengths. There may be concerns as to why a Research One institution is adopting a contract system for its faculty. The rationale is not to eliminate the research component, but to find a better way to appreciate research and teaching, while making faculty positions more accessible and inclusive. As Ernest Boyer, former U.S. commissioner of education, suggests research and teaching to be considered equally important (Riley, 2011). Additionally, implementing a teaching improvement program, with monetary incentives, modeled after Ohio State University's pilot, aims to ultimately provide better experiences for

their students (Ohio State University, 2018). Professional development (PD) opportunities a few times per year allow faculty to demonstrate how they are implementing the latest higher education trends and best practices in their field. These PD opportunities provide a designated time and space for research and teaching to coincide in an effort to become more equally valued.

Players Included

Changing the current tenure system at a public four-year Research One institution will involve many people such as higher-level administration, tenured (and tenure-track) faculty, adjunct faculty, and students. It is crucial to have the student voice throughout this process as that perspective is commonly lost in the shuffle. Faculty and student focus groups could help provide insight into their experiences and inform future decisions.

Projected Outcomes

Changing to a contract system creates a more even playing field for professors by supporting certain populations of faculty who continually face barriers in obtaining tenure. The contract system allows faculty to be seen for their accomplishments beyond ambiguous tenure criteria. These changes create a more accessible and inclusive faculty culture, projected improved job satisfaction (which can lead to improved teaching), and improved faculty retention for previous adjunct/non-tenured professors. Subsequently, these changes will positively impact students: 1) They will be the beneficiaries of higher-quality teaching, a level of excellence many universities promise and 2) The change will disrupt the hypocrisy between an institution's values of diversity and inclusion and the lack of faculty inclusion, which presents a confusing paradox for students, something potentially more troublesome for minority students.

National Trends

Sixty-six to 73% of American higher education professionals are adjunct, part-time, or limited-contract faculty (American Council on Education, 2018; Gittleman, 2015) and the number of tenure-track positions are decreasing (American Council on Education, 2018). Some predict that within the next 50 years tenure may become obsolete (Gittleman, 2015). At a university without tenure, 97% of Florida

Institute of Technology professors continually had their contracts renewed over the past 10 years (Gardner, 2018). Within the last nine years, Florida, Louisiana, and Missouri have all taken legislative steps to eliminate tenure in their states, but no change has occurred yet (Zamuido-Suaréz, 2017; Greenblatt 2010). Perhaps one of the most crucial national trends is shortchanging students on their education. Riley (2011) states “...as long as this [tenured] unstable and harried work force takes on a significant percentage of classroom duties, students won’t be getting the college education they deserve” (p. 93).

Unique, Innovative, and Relevant Idea

Contracts will provide a more equitable experience for all faculty, which leads to a ripple effect that impacts students as well. Contract faculty who feel included and empowered in their positions may be more likely to enjoy their jobs, which can be reflected in student interactions and experiences. This new proposed idea is unique, innovative, and relevant because it focuses on students. Countless tenure research and literature fail to acknowledge a key variable -- the students -- and these institutions would not exist without students. Consider the values of two major Arizona universities: University of Arizona (U of A) and Northern Arizona University (NAU). U of A’s core values include a diverse and inclusive community, excellence, innovation and entrepreneurial action, integrity, and partnerships (University of Arizona, 2019). NAU’s values are: student centered, integrity, diversity, service, discovery, and excellence (Northern Arizona University, 2019). Both universities’ values mention diversity, excellence, and the importance of people, but the current tenure system contradicts these stated values. It is disconcerting that a university does not have an accessible and inclusive system for all faculty, nor do they consider how this system impacts their students from truly experiencing this promised excellence.

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