

Tenure: rotten root of education?

A tenured professor flails the archaic system

By
Robert
A. Rutland

Robert A. Rutland is a tenured professor at The University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and is currently on one year sabbatical.

Tenure is currently an important issue at The University of Alberta as Gordon Hirabayashi, sociology dept. head, has recommended that two sociology professors be denied tenure. Several years ago, tenure was denied two philosophy professors here — Williams and Murray—and a lot of fuss was raised.

At the risk of committing academic suicide, let me say that if any root of education is more rotten than the tenure system, almost two decades have not exposed me to it.

The tenure system, whereby a professor receives an impregnable position on the campus, was conceived as the ultimate expression of academic freedom, to guarantee the professor his right to pronounce truth as he saw it. That root goes deep, back to the medieval university system when churchmen-professors took a narrow focus of truth but insisted on their right to pursue it.

Now the tenure system has become the last refuge of the academic sloth, a pompous breed of what H. L. Mencken once called the "university ignoramus," whose intellectual atrophy commenced the moment tenure was bestowed on him.

Freedom its basis

The tenure system operates differently at various educational institutions, but the avowed goal of academic freedom is always its basis. In most cases at the secondary school and college-university level it is conferred for longevity (roughly three to seven years, depending on the ebb and flow of difficulty in obtaining staff), presumably linked with an expanding ability to teach, i.e., to communicate knowledge to students.

In colleges and universities, instructors and assistant professors ordinarily have aca-

demical rank but no tenure (unless they manage to hang around for an extraordinarily long time). The old joke is that once tenure is conferred by one's colleagues, a man is hired on a lifetime contract barring his involvement in a mass orgy at some local vice den. And by today's shifting moral standards even that concept may be changing.

From the insider's viewpoint, it is good to hear cries for reform, but distressing to see no follow-up in specific recommendations for a better system of higher education.

To be sure, there must be some way of improving an exchange of information between students and professors without following the anarchy of Columbia University's rebels. But beyond dramatic condemnation at the "publish-or-perish" system, which is periodically raised at most viable institutions, the student demonstrators have shown little concern over the inherent evils of professional tenure.

No follow-up

The failure to criticize the tenure system may stem from the layman's (and for that matter, the student's) unfamiliarity with the system. Since it is a protective coating designed to uphold academic freedom, tenure has an aura of sanctity. It is notable indeed to assure the integrity of the classroom as a marketplace for ideas, for courageous professors have to know they can be honest thinkers and still have a paycheck.

But tenure can also shield the lazy professor who begins his long glide into oblivion once he achieves tenure. Once his status is beyond question (no one will bug his lectures electronically, and letters of complaint almost never come from students), the frail professor can duck his duty and rarely be called to account.

His lecture notes may never be rewritten during the remainder of his lifetime. Who's to know?

A careful researcher enhances his value as a classroom teacher and brings new insights to old problems. The trick is to keep the professor working at such problems after he has achieved tenure.

The risk is that bulk rather than quality may be judged in reviewing a professor's research, usually his books or articles in scholarly journals. And the important question to ask now is whether the



professor is provocative and challenging as a teacher, regardless of his ranking on the tenure ladder.

The truth is that professors who encourage the quality of thinking amongst their students do not need the tenure shield. They are constantly besieged with offers from other academic institutions as well as from industry, simply because they are known for their achievements.

A sinecure

On the other hand, many tenure-rank professors find the shield a sinecure for life. Assured of an annual salary ranging from \$10,000 to \$25,000 for nine months of pleasant work for the rest of their academic life and generous retirement benefits, they cease reading and researching in their field and turn the hard work over to teaching assistants, graduate research aides and graders who can read and mark their sterile examinations.

Rather than provoke think-

ing, these tenure-addicted teachers constantly arrange for foreign travel during the summer vacations and for their sabbatical leaves.

For three months of each year they substitute travel for achievement as they bounce around the globe, and their most productive thinking during six years is for the sabbatical proposal that will grant them a free seventh year to range abroad in search of the pain of culture: foreign travel.

Generally speaking, all teachers were overworked and underpaid in the decade from 1945 to 1955, when there was a lag in salary increases and a heavy workload in education from kindergarten to medical school.

But that situation has been remedied on the university campuses, where an instructor in 1968 made the salary paid to a full professor in 1948, and teach less than his earlier counterpart.

The academic marketplace is crowded today with department chairmen with bulging

budgets who can dangle a \$28,500 special chair in a candidate's face. It carries tenure, of course, and a teaching load of three or four courses (unless he is writing a book, in which case his course-load can be eased to two three-hour classes each week from October through June).

It's just great

So the tenured professor of 1968 has a privileged status that would be the envy of a captain of industry in the \$200,000 income bracket. The tenured professor has access to the greatest of libraries, discounted or free tickets to athletic events, concerts, lectures, and cut-rate offers on books, records, clothing and other items at the college campus stores.

In return, the conscientious professor keeps abreast of the discoveries in his field, does research and reports on his findings, guides students into pathways of productive thinking, and shares his findings with colleagues and students. He does not need the tenure system for his halo.

The lazy and incompetent fraud, who by some means usually longevity or timidity from protective colleagues) has arrived at tenure status, can thumb his nose at students, administrators, and regents.

If he is threatened with a review, the fraudulent pro-American Assn. of University Professor's rules on dismissal, cry "wolf" to the local campus committee on tenure, and thus make the embarrassment of his own ineptitude become a cause celebre for campus liberals.

Rarely fired

Rarely does our society fire a person who is incompetent. He may be transferred or relegated to a useless job, but hardly ever fired.

The professor is only a spectacular recipient of this kind of modern protectionism — but he is placed where he can do a good deal of damage because of talents left unstimulated or disillusioned by his indifference to the professor's true role.

Until now we have paid a high price for academic freedom, and it has been worth it. But now the issues need to be separated.

Academic freedom does permit ideas to work in an atmosphere conducive to excellence and insight.

The tenure system, however, while masking as a partner of academic freedom has enabled dry rot to spread on dozens of campus departments across the land.