

TENURE

By NAT HENTOFF
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In the course of an academic year, I lecture at a different university at least one a week, more often twice. On the basis of conversations with students, faculty, and administrators throughout the country—and my own observations—I am convinced that those most resistant to fundamental changes in the American university are the tenured professors, the ones who have “made it” in the system and therefore oppose basic changes in it because they are, after all, the system’s resplendent products. Protected for life through the sanctity of tenure, they cultivate their academic gardens—many of them quite tiny and specialized indeed.

Control of education is held by a privileged hierarchy of teachers.

Are the students dissatisfied? Is the university out of touch with the needs and frustrations of the surrounding community? These are transient squalls to most tenured professors, for they know that only death, retirement, or assassinating a member of the boards of trustees can ever threaten their security.

Again and again, I have heard of thwarted plans for authentic student-initiated independent study, for really breaking through “disciplinary” boundaries in restructuring courses, for working together with community groups to liberate the resources of the university. In the way of these changes have stood the tenured faculty, among them division chairmen, who have the essential decision-making power.

Again and again, I hear of and meet young, untenured faculty who, with students, have been energetically involved in formulating such changes. Some, besides, have been active with students in protests against the war, against racism, against university insularity. Repeatedly, it is these faculty members who do not get tenure because the one who have already made it regard them as exacerbating, as “unprofessional,” as disturbers of the peace of the university.

The rigidity, moreover, of faculty bureaucracy is beyond parody. An example: I was invited to give a freshman orientation lecture at an eastern school, located in a black ghetto. Until this year, the school’s admission policy had functioned almost as if there were no ghetto at all surrounding it. But finally, after disruptive protests the preceding spring, a markedly larger percentage of black students were to be admitted. A few days before I was to arrive, a new faculty member wrote me that there were some things I ought to know if I didn’t want to walk into an ambush. The faculty committee that chose me as speaker, composed mainly of tenured professors, was all white. The black students had not been consulted. But now the black students insisted on having their own

speaker as well. The faculty committee, having already made its decision, was reluctant to give the black students’ speaker any time on the program and they certainly wouldn’t pay him anything. All funds for freshman orientation day had already been allocated.

I called up the man on the committee who had first contacted me and proposed that my fee be split in half with the speaker whom the black students had selected. “Sounds like a fine idea,” he said.

Some vestigial instinct about the nature of the senior faculty mind prompted me to make another call the day before I was to come.

“You’ve told the black students what I suggested,” I said to my original contact at the school.

“Well, no, we haven’t,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Well, you see, we have no procedure by which we can communicate with them.”

“How about the phone?” I asked.

“You don’t understand. There is no precedent for changing the program in this way. Nor is there a precedent for consulting a particular group of students about the nature of the program.”

“OK. You either tell the black students what I’ve suggested or *this* will be the subject of my freshman orientation lecture.”

I didn’t take any chances though. I got the name of a leader of the black students, called him directly, told him what was going on, and my proposal turned out to be not so impossible to implement after all.

Two weeks later, at another school, I was told of a carefully worked out plan to bring a sizable number of the “underachieving” young people in the local town, white and black, into the college. It would require considerable extra work by faculty, but there were young teachers willing to do it. And it would require changing a number of the college’s venerable admission rules. The man who had worked out the design is a member of the administration. In his thirties, he is an energetic, knowledgeable educator, familiar with *The Work of Edgar Friedenberg, John Holt (Chevron)* and other other figures who are subverting the “conventional wisdom” of professional education.

“When does it start?” I asked him.

“It may not start at all,” he said. “The senior faculty is very suspicious. This sort of thing has never been done here before. Some are also afraid it might make them do more teaching than they like to do, and teaching with unpredictable, sometimes quite forceful kids. My only chance is to convince the senior faculty that for *them* nothing will change. Their fiefdoms, their prerogatives will remain exactly as they are. But the odds are against us.”

You don’t have to take my word concerning the degree to which tenured faculty are a massive obstacle to change. Their obsession with precedent—and their own manifold deficiencies as teachers—pervade the literature of criticism of the academy. And I don’t mean only the radical critics. Clark Kerr, for example, writes that “few institutions are so conservative as the universities about their own affairs while their members are so liberal

about the affairs of others; and sometimes the most liberal faculty member in one context is the most conservative in another . . . The faculty member who gets arrested as a ‘freedom rider’ in the South is a flaming supporter of unanimous prior faculty consent to any change whatsoever on his campus in the North . . . (And) when change comes it is rarely at the instigation of this group . . . (the faculty) is more likely to accept or reject or comment, than to devise and propose.”

Richard Desmond, dean of faculties at Illinois State University, is more blunt: “The career interests of the faculty are pitted squarely against the educational interests of the students.”

Why is this so? Look at how faculty members get promoted, at how they achieve tenure. Aside from the necessity of playing it cool on campus, of not becoming controversial (“Obsequiousness to senior faculty is a great help,” a maverick member of one university tenure committee told me), an instructor on the way up knows he has to publish to make it. And to publish you have to do research. Teaching and other contacts with students become decidedly secondary.

Because of this preference among the tenured faculty for research, the system is rigged against those who like to teach undergraduates and do it well. A young instructor quickly discovers that the way to get ahead in the academic world is to find a position with the lightest possible teaching load in order to devote his major energies to research . . . If he devotes his energies to teaching and becomes an excellent teacher, he will gain only a local reputation. Since such a reputation will be with students rather than with faculty colleagues, he is not likely to be offered new appointments and may be denied tenure and promotion within his own situation.

Only joint student-faculty committees should have power of promotion. Tenure must be abolished.

To hell, then, with the students, And the quality of research? Look at it, if you can stand the tedium, in the professional journals. Much of it is research engaged in only to get enough credit cards for tenure. Or, as Jacques Barzun puts it in *The American University*: “On the dizzy heights of the academy, projects abound; few are sufficiently criticized. They are full of wind and water, much too overwritten to be seen through—a tenure summary would destroy them.”

What we have—exceptions admitted—are tenured mandarins. And once they have become members of the elect, they continue to pursue the life style which has already rewarded them with a life-

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