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The University Tenure "Problem"

Many of our major universities have relatively high ratios of tenured to nontenured faculty members. In many cases, more than half the faculty is tenured; more commonly, three-quarters or more may be tenured; and in a few exceptional situations, all faculty members are tenured. I believe that such high ratios are not desirable for our large research universities, but I would argue that the problem is not as serious as many think. A decade ago, when there was little concern about the tenure ratio, it was becoming a serious problem. Today it attracts much more attention, but I believe there is less to be concerned about. Given reasonable decisions on the part of university administrators, the problem may even disappear within the next decade.

First, we have passed through most of the years of few or even no retirements. In the period 1935 to 1945 few faculty members were hired, which accounts for the low retirement rate in the recent past.

Second, considerable attention is being paid to facilitating early retirement. Some universities have lowered the mandatory retirement age, a step they may come to regret in the not too distant future. Voluntary early retirement is likely to increase in popularity, partly because of the introduction in the early postwar years of more generous retirement plans, coupled with the initiation of the College Retirement Equities Fund as an auxiliary retirement annuity. If the economy continues to improve, and if the stock market advances sharply over the next decade, as many believe it will, older faculty members will find it increasingly attractive to retire early.

Third, undergraduate enrollments have increased and will probably remain high throughout much of the next decade. As a result, new positions are being created and replacements for retiring faculty members are being authorized to meet teaching needs. Even now, hiring in the research universities is about commensurate with that expected on the average for an even faculty age distribution.

Fourth, the large number of faculty members employed between about 1955 and 1968 will soon reach retirement age, and retirements should peak between 1985 and 1990. This period will provide an opportunity to decrease the ratio of tenured to nontenured faculty members to a more reasonable steady-state level.

This positive prognosis depends, however, on certain courses of action. It is still important that the tenure decision be made very selectively, with an eye toward the obligations of the institution to its future students. If a particular tenure decision is a debatable one, it should be negative.

It is important to adjust the lopsided age distribution of our faculties by filling almost all positions at the beginning level. Tight budgets are forcing us in this direction, but we should do so even if funds are plentiful.

Finally, we must continue high utilization of innovative young faculty members in the combined research-graduate education role. The creation of this opportunity for the young is, I believe, the outstanding educational accomplishment of the United States in this era. When a steady-state age distribution is reached there will be fewer young people on our faculties. We must strive to protect their interests, conserve their time, and discourage diversionary assignments. More of the routine teaching should be shouldered by older faculty members, preferably voluntarily, but if not, by assignment.

If we work systematically to protect what is genuinely vital for the future, the university tenure "problem" will disappear quietly from the scene.

—HARRISON SHULL, *Chemistry Department, Indiana University, Bloomington 47401*