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Tenure: A Sacred Cow?

There is probably no other profession in which an incompetent or thoroughly lazy individual is as securely protected against dismissal as the academic one. Yet extreme cases of such incompetence are so demoralizing, to colleagues and students alike, that calls for the abolition of tenure are made with increasing frequency. Giving in to these demands, however, would be like throwing out the baby with the bathwater. It would entail the end of academic freedom because putative incompetence would be used as an excuse for firing professors for political or ideological reasons. It would take us back to the situation of more than 50 years ago when professors at many denominational, private, and state schools had an exceedingly precarious hold.

Is there any escape from this dilemma? Yes, by adopting a system of tenure review. Let us say, a departmental committee would recommend annually the renewal of tenure of the members of the department who had last been reviewed not less than five or more than ten years before. The committee would recommend renewal of tenure for all those who had earned such a recommendation by the quality of their teaching and research or by other achievements. Any case in which the committee had serious doubts (perhaps one out of 20) would be referred to the administration, which would then appoint an ad hoc committee of peers from other institutions that would make a final recommendation to be acted on by the president of the university.

The president of a well-known university is reported to have said that he was in favor of tenure review, but that an annual review system was too costly. He would be entirely right, of course, if each faculty member were to be reviewed annually. But reviews at 10-year intervals would not be too great a burden when only those few cases reached the administration in which there was legitimate doubt about tenure renewal. By comparison, an incompetent faculty member is much more costly.

Would such a system work? Not perfectly, but what system ever does? Occasionally a department might shield a colleague even though he was incompetent. Still, the majority of the drones would have to be screened by the review system. More importantly, the mere fact that tenure had to be earned again at 10-year intervals would be enough to make most of those with a tendency to be lazy pull themselves together instead of becoming a burden to their department.

But there is another reason for tightening up on tenure. Our colleges and universities are turning out more graduates and Ph.D.'s than the job market can absorb. We must face the reality that the effects of the postwar baby boom are over. Colleges are no longer expanding, and indeed in many areas they are contracting. Matters will be made worse if proposals to raise the retirement age above 65 are implemented, for this will further retard the opening of positions for recent graduates. Under the circumstances, every effort must be made to provide every conceivable opening for recent graduates. It is a matter of simple justice not to keep positions filled with incompetents when excellently qualified eager young academicians are jobless.

Nor should we overlook how demoralizing it is for students and colleagues when a department has a professor who, relying on tenure protection, has long given up making any contribution. A system, such as our present one, which permits this, is inconsistent with academic integrity. —ERNST MAYR, *Agassiz Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138*