JOB SECURITY

Tenure, Under Fire Once Again, Still Holds Strong

Ask Florida State University (FSU) chemist Ralph Dougherty if academic tenure is in trouble, and you'll hear a loud "yes." The FSU Board of Regents is considering opening a tenth campus in the system with 3- to 5-year contracts instead of tenure. "Tenure here is under fire," says Dougherty. Pot shots are being taken at the policy elsewhere, too. At 500-student liberal arts Bennington College in Vermont, a decision earlier this year to get rid of a tenurelike system has prompted a faculty revolt and reams of national press. And at a half-dozen other small, mostly liberal arts, colleges across the country, tenure has recently given way to limited-term contracts, special long-sabbatical deals instead of tenure, or simply the replacement of tenured professors with part-timers, non-tenured faculty, or no one at all.

But in the larger picture, the institution of tenure still holds strong. Figures from the U.S. Department of Education show that overall, the percentage of full-time faculty with tenure in the United States has actually gone up a point in the last decade, to 63.7% in the 1991–92 academic year. For private, 4-year colleges, the percentage of tenured professors has risen from 60.4% in 1980–81 to 62.7% in 1991–92. The issue of tenure reform "comes up every so often," says the University of California (UC) system's assistant vice president for academic advancement Ellen Switkes, "but the fact is that there is only a handful of institutions—mostly small colleges—that have actually abolished tenure."

The last time tenure was attacked was in the 1970s, when some university officials argued that the policy simply protected faculty deadwood. But this time the arguments tend more toward the bottom line: Colleges and universities are facing budget cuts and swelling student populations. And tenured faculty, no longer facing a mandatory retirement age, make it difficult to downsize or to shift faculty resources around, the argument goes.

So the question has been cropping up once again in state legislatures and on boards of regents: Does tenure still make sense? Some critics think it's an institution out of step with the times. As R. Eugene Rice, scholar in residence for the American Association of Higher Education, puts it: "There's a sense of this especially privileged, protected class." Because other industries are downsizing, says Rice, the feeling is "why should this one be any different?"

There's another tack taken against tenure: It's biased against women. Princeton Univerity geneticist Shirley Tilghman notes that, "because a tenure decision typically comes at age 35 to 36," it particularly discriminates against women, "because those are also peak childbearing and rearing years."

Despite all the turmoil, however, the vast majority of U.S. institutions of higher education have no desire to drop tenure. The reasons are relatively simple. Most faculty members support it—71%, according to a 1989 survey by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Many agree with FSU's Dougherty, who thinks that the proposal at his school to replace tenure with 5-year contracts would be "a form of indentured servitude for anyone stupid enough to take them."

What's more, the idea that abolishing tenure would save money is unproven and "mostly untested," says Switkes. Richard Chait, a University of Maryland education professor who has been studying tenure for two decades, believes that the institution is so entrenched in U.S. higher education, and backed so strongly by such unionlike organizations as the American Association of University Professors, that no dramatic changes are likely.

So it appears that, at least for now, whatever changes tenure undergoes will be partial and tentative. To address the problems, especially the obstacles for women, some universities, such as the UC system, are instituting reforms that include stop-the-clock probationary periods (for example, taking 2 years out from a 5-year pretenure period to have children). Other approaches are to offer part-time positions with tenure (now offered by some 22% of research universities), and off-track appointments with later conversion to tenure track.

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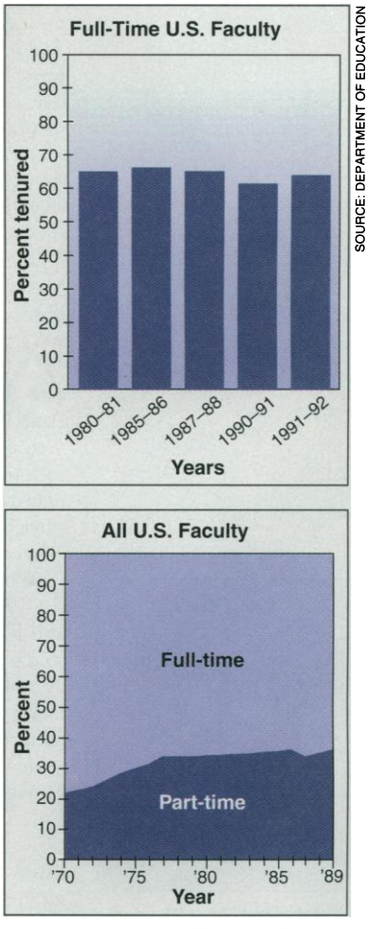
Some colleges and universities are also making tenure more difficult to obtain. This is because second-tier institutions, able to pick and choose among first-rate academics caught in a job squeeze, are raising their standards, says Switkes. These schools are placing greater emphasis on research or are raising their overall criteria for tenure. The trend is also reflected in the Carnegie survey, in which more than half of faculty members nationwide said that tenure is more difficult to achieve today than it was 5 years ago. That doesn't mean fewer people are getting tenure, though, says Switkes—rather, the less qualified people are now less likely to get academic jobs.

Change is also taking place outside the tenure system. To save money and gain flexibility, universities are increasingly using part-time faculty. Over the last decade, the percentage of part-time faculty at U.S. institutions has risen by more than 10% and is projected to reach 283,000 at 4-year campuses by the end of the decade (see chart). With these kinds of adjustments it may be possible for administrators to avoid a head-on assault on tenure—for now. But the debate over the policy is certain to be exacerbated by the end of mandatory retirement, which took effect last January and effectively made tenure a lifetime employment contract, says associate provost Jay Kaiser of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). This will add to the costs of tenure, and add to the pressure to modify or eliminate it. But so far, universities have approached this with extreme caution. John Hansman of the department of aeronautics and astronautics, head of the MIT committee studying retirement policies, says, "We have not tackled the issue because it's too big an issue." That attitude, however, can't prevail forever.

–Christopher Anderson



Tenure hanging on. Part-time faculty have increased *(bottom chart)*, but the percentage of tenured full-timers has changed little *(top)*.