Tenure Turmoil Sparks Reforms

Squeezed by shrinking budgets, colleges and universities are reexamining tenure. While a few institutions have dropped the system, most are tightening it up to ensure greater accountability

Two months ago, the full-time faculty of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, came within a few votes of unionizing. What impelled these professors toward an arrangement that most academics would regard as constricting, homogenizing, and generally beneath their dignity? Fear. Last year, the state Board of Regents advanced a set of proposals—including procedures for permitting individual pay cuts and new grounds for layoffs—that most of the faculty saw as a threat to the tenure system and academic freedom. Ultimately, the regent who was pushing hardest for the proposals resigned from the board, and the other regents endorsed reforms that closely resembled those that the faculty senate had already approved. But many faculty members, still rattled and mistrustful, voted for the union anyway.

The Minnesota fracas may mark the low point in what has been a period of great turmoil for the tenure system. Pinched by shrinking budgets, institutions of higher education, state legislatures, and boards of regents in states all around the United States have been reevaluating the terms of tenure. The system also has come under attack in popular books such as *Profscam* and *Impostors in the Temple* that have characterized many professors as incompetents and slackers who have abandoned their teaching responsibilities and are getting a free feed at the public trough. And in recent years, some smaller, private colleges have actually moved to abolish tenure. In 1994, for example, Bennington College in Vermont executed a bloody restructuring of its faculty that involved firing one-third of its members and putting the rest on 3-year, renewable contracts.

But now, the storm seems to be subsiding, leaving in its wake reforms that are changing the landscape of higher education. "I really do think there has been a coming together; ... you would have found a lot more extremists 1 or 2 years ago," says James Muyskens, senior vice chancellor for academic affairs in the Georgia state university system. Tenure's defenders still insist that it is the only way to guarantee academic freedom, and that attempts to squeeze universities into a lean, mean "corporate" model will inevitably damage them. But, increasingly, they are acknowledging that while most professors are hardworking, instituting new mechanisms to ensure accountability would benefit students and faculty alike, and many institutions are beginning to tighten up their tenure agreements. On many campuses, tenure is becoming harder to get and—with new systems of posttenure review—a little easier to lose. And in some cases, it is being redefined as a guarantee of a teaching job and an office, but not necessarily a full salary.

A system under stress

Given tenure's historic role as a bulwark of academic freedom, it is no surprise that proposals to change the system have provoked fierce battles. The need for some sort of protective code so scholars can pursue their work without fear of losing their jobs for advancing unpopular views has been recognized since the Middle Ages. But in the United States, the principles of tenure were first enunciated formally in 1915 when scholars banded together to create the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). This move followed many instances in which academics had been fired because of their views on such contentious issues as slavery, secession, and evolution. In 1940, the AAUP adopted a written policy on tenure, calling it a means to ensure scholarly freedom as well as "a sufficient degree of economic security to make the profession attractive to men and women of ability."

In recent years, however, tenure has been criticized for creating elitist islands that are immune from today's pressures for more efficient and productive organizations. The criticisms have been fueled by a variety of factors, from the abolition of mandatory retirement—which gives the notion of a lifetime job a whole new meaning—to administrators' desire for more flexibility in coping with changing curricula.

But the main trigger is economic: stagnant or shrinking university budgets. "People have been saying 'Corporations are downsizing. Why not universities?'" says English professor Lawrence Poston of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, who headed a Chicago panel examining tenure. Reacting to taxpayer revolts and burgeoning public health and welfare programs, the state of California, for instance, cut $341 million from the budget of the University of California system between 1990 and 1994. New York slashed $200 million from the annual operating budget of the State University of New York between 1988 and 1994, according to Bruce Johnstone, an expert on higher education financing at SUNY, Buffalo, who was SUNY chancellor at the time. Smaller, private colleges also are getting squeezed by rising costs, including those stemming from new state and federal regulations.

Demographics have exacerbated the tensions. Many of today's faculty members got tenure during the rapid expansion of higher education in the 1960s. This huge cohort will not begin retiring for at least another decade, so new openings are few and far between, and institutions of higher education increasingly are hiring temporary, part-time, or adjunct faculty. Indeed, 43% of those who do get academic jobs are hired on a part-time basis, according to Jack Schuster, a professor of education and public policy at Claremont

POSTSECONDARY FACULTY IN THE UNITED STATES

	1975	1993
Total faculty:	**628,000**	**914,000**
Tenured (% of total):	228,000 (36%)	282,000 (31%)
Tenure-track (% of total):	126,000 (20%)	113,000 (12%)
Full-time (% of total):	440,000 (70%)	544,000 (60%)
Part-time (% of total):	188,000 (30%)	370,000 (40%)

SOURCE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

New track. U.S. colleges and universities are increasingly relying on nontenured faculty members such as Anna Flynn *(above)*, a senior lecturer in business administration at Arizona State University, Phoenix.

Graduate School in California. These trends have created a cadre of disgruntled, "gypsy" scholars on many campuses.

At the same time, the public has become increasingly skeptical about the value of institutions of higher education, in part because of the perception that many professors are leaving the education of undergraduates to teaching assistants. "Every board of regents member seems to know someone with a daughter who is being taught by an incomprehensible graduate student," says Thomas McGovern, chair of the psychology department at Arizona State University West in Phoenix.

Harvard University education professor Richard Chait, who has been hired to advise a number of universities on tenure reform, also notes that the economic squeeze has magnified concerns about fairness. Says Chait, there is "growing skepticism among women and minorities that the system works fairly." According to Schuster, even among younger faculty members, 79% of male full professors have tenure, while only 67% of female full professors do.

Objections to tenure have not been limited to those who don't have it. A 1992 poll by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, revealed that one-third of 34,000 respondents agreed that "tenure is an outmoded concept."

A patchwork of reforms

These sorts of sentiments have spurred some state legislatures and boards of regents to try to do away with tenure altogether. Some 3 years ago in Arizona, for instance, a regent proposed that tenure be eliminated at all state universities. In the fall of 1995, "the betting was we were going to be the state that screwed it up for everybody," McGovern says. But in January 1996, the regents backed off. Faculty members "helped them to see that the problems [such as improving the overall caliber of teaching] would not be solved by getting rid of tenure," says McGovern. They also concluded that junking the system "would seriously threaten" the reputation and recruiting power of the university.

Indeed, this appears to be the prevailing pattern. "A lot of commissions and regents and legislatures start out with the idea of abolishing tenure," says Iris Molotsky of the AAUP. But after taking a closer look, they soften their stance, she says, and move to reform rather than abandon tenure. "The climate, I believe, is moderating now," agrees Poston.

By far the most common reform is posttenure review. According to Christine Licata, associate dean of academic affairs at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, state universities in almost 30 states are considering such reviews, which typically involve a periodic evaluation by peers of a faculty member's performance. The main purpose of most review schemes is not to get rid of "deadwood," she says, but to prevent its formation. If a faculty member is found wanting, reviewers put together a "faculty development" plan. In most cases, faculty members can be fired only if they fail to show improvement over several subsequent evaluations. "If posttenure review works as I think, there will be less people to get rid of—performance difficulties will be recognized before they get out of hand," says Licata.

Having reaffirmed the value of tenure, the state of Arizona has installed a review system in which every faculty member's teaching, research, and service to his or her discipline are reviewed annually. Other institutions that have had toothless posttenure reviews on the books for years are getting serious about it. In the University of Colorado system, the vague "adequate cause" phrase as a criterion for expulsion from a tenured post has gone out the window, says historian Michel Dahlin, assistant vice president for academic affairs. Last year, after the state legislature ordered a study of the tenure system, the faculty began cooperating with tenure reforms that involve explicit sanctions, including firing, that could follow unsatisfactory posttenure evaluations. "Rather than going to the barricades, we wanted to take seriously what we saw as the worthy part of the concern," says Dahlin.

In the Georgia state system, posttenure review may already be working, although in an unexpected way. Just the prospect of review has sped up the departure of some underperforming professors, asserts Muyskens. Two years ago, Georgia started reviewing 20% of the faculty each year. Muyskens says that when candidates for the first review cycle were announced at one campus, a few promptly opted for early retirement: "Rather than subject themselves to peer review, ... they decided to walk away."

Posttenure review is not being embraced everywhere, however. A group of faculty members and administrators at the University of Illinois called the Seminar on Tenure, for example, recently presented the university community with a report arguing that such reviews would not bring any unrecognized slackers to light and would be "enormously wasteful of faculty time and effort." In the Texas state system, where guidelines currently are being drawn up requiring comprehensive evaluations of tenured faculty members every 5 years, some professors have protested to the Board of Regents that such review amounts to nothing less

Evergreen Adopts Tenurelike System

To hear some critics tell it, tenure is going the way of the one-room schoolhouse. But a closer look at one college suggests that reports of the system's demise may be premature. Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, is often cited as having spurned tenure. But, in fact, since its founding in 1968, it has moved ever closer to an arrangement that looks very tenurelike.

When the college was established, both junior and senior faculty members were given 3-year renewable contracts. But this approach turned out to be "fatally flawed," Evergreen's academic dean John Cushing wrote in a discussion of the tenure system in the online magazine *HMS Beagle* (http://biomednet.com/hmsbeagle). For one thing, evaluations proved to entail a "staggering" amount of work. But more importantly, "as society became increasingly litigious," it became almost impossible to get rid of incompetent instructors. The college revised the system in 1989 to build in probationary periods for new faculty and fine-tuned tenure terms again in 1996.

Now, new faculty members are hired on short-term contracts for at least 3 years, after which they can be shifted to a "continuing contract." Failure to get a continuing contract after 8 years means dismissal. But routine evaluations, including extensive reviews by peers every 5 years, "are strictly developmental—they cannot lead to dismissal," according to Cushing.

THE EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE

Back to the future. Clock tower at Evergreen State College.

Although Evergreen seems to have reverted to a de facto tenure system, the college still credits itself with an ethos where evaluation—faculty-student, student-faculty, and faculty-faculty—is a way of life. Provost Barbara Smith thinks all of U.S. higher education could use more of the Evergreen spirit: "There's not enough talk about what it takes [for a faculty member] to be productive over the long haul." –C.H.

than "tenure recertification," according to mathematician Robert Goad of Sam Houston State University in Huntsville and coordinator of the state universities' Council for Faculty Governance Organizations. They fear that, under the new system, the university will no longer bear the burden of proving that a professor is incompetent. Rather, it will be up to faculty members to prove that they are good enough to keep their jobs.

Other institutions, particularly medical schools, are opting to modify the terms of tenure rather than simply try to make faculty members more accountable. One such change is to cut guaranteed salaries for clinicians and researchers who typically round out their medical-school salaries with income from research grants and clinical practices. This has aroused a lot of anger in at least one school—the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles—where tenured members of the basic science faculty have brought suit against the university. They allege that it is violating the terms of their employment by reducing their salaries by 25% (*Science*, 29 November 1996, p. 1471).

The USC battle stems in part from the fact that the university's tenure agreement is vague on the subject of salary. Indeed, says Robert Jones of the Association of American Medical Colleges in Washington, D.C., "tenure carries with it an explicit financial guarantee at about 69% of our schools." At the other schools, all tenure ensures is "continuing appointment at a designated rank."

No specific salary guarantees used to be needed, says neuroscientist Robert Rubin of the Allegheny University of the Health Sciences in Pittsburgh. But now medical schools are at the front lines of the fiscal crunch, thanks to health-care system reforms that have drastically reduced clinical income at university medical centers. "In the past, medical centers were universities' cash cows. Now, they are a cash drain," he says. As a result, most U.S. medical schools are rethinking salary agreements, says pediatrician Sharon Hostler of the University of Virginia Medical School in Charlottesville. At Virginia, for instance, authorities are contemplating as much as a 40% cut in guaranteed salaries for clinicians and researchers.

Other institutions are trying to limit the number of tenured jobs while still making posts prestigious enough to attract top-notch scholars, says Judith Gappa, a professor of educational administration at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. At American University in Washington, D.C., she says, administrators are making greater use of full-time, nontenured appointments with titles such as "senior distinguished lecturer." And New York University business school in Manhattan has a nontenured post called "professor of practice." Gappa has surveyed faculty attitudes at several campuses and concludes that faculty members are satisfied with such renewable posts "where people are well integrated and have full status as faculty members."

Although faculty members have, by and large, been willing to go along with reforms of the system, they have remained firm in their support for the fundamental concept of tenure. The main reason is the old academic freedom argument. The freedom to determine and carry out long-term research projects or criticize a university's administration would inevitably be circumscribed if faculty members had to go "hat in hand" to the contract review committee every 5 years, contends AAUP Associate Secretary Jonathan Knight. Tenure defenders also argue that for all the grumbling about lack of accountability, the tenure system has a built-in quality-control checkpoint. On a contract system, says Poston, administrators could be tempted to keep on a mediocre person "rather than face an up-or-out moment."

Indeed, to many faculty members, such as Claremont's Schuster, tenure has been getting a bum rap. It is "a convenient scapegoat" for ills that its abolition would do little or nothing to remedy, he says. But to many outside the academy, including state legislators, it will remain a crucial part of a system that is ripe for reform. Although the temperature of the discussion may have dropped in recent months, the debate is far from over.

–Constance Holden

MERIT REVIEW

NSF Adopts New Guidelines

Starting this fall, scientists who review grant proposals for the National Science Foundation (NSF) will be asked to judge them according to just two criteria: scientific quality and impact on society. The new approach, adopted last week by the National Science Board (NSB), eliminates separate criteria relating to the applicant's past research and the effect of the project on the nation's scientific infrastructure. Each is now a component of one of the two remaining categories.

The revisions are the first major change since 1981 in the criteria NSF uses to distribute most of its $3.3 billion budget. A draft of the new approach went out last fall (*Science*, 29 November 1996, p. 1453), and NSF received 325 comments. Slightly more than half said the new criteria were an improvement, although many viewed the changes as minor. NSF officials say they acted because reviewers often failed to address a proposal's utility and potential impact or didn't understand what was being asked. In either case, the result was less information upon which to base funding decisions.

The biggest revision to the initial draft was a sharpening of the distinction between the two criteria. Many of the researchers who commented urged NSF to make clear the paramount importance of scientific excellence, including the track record of the applicant, in choosing what research to fund. The science board took that suggestion to heart, deciding that reviewers should be told that the two criteria "need not be weighted equally" and giving program officers and reviewers leeway to decide their relative importance.

"For traditional research proposals, I think quality is probably more important," says Warren Washington, an atmospheric chemist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, and chair of the NSB task force that drafted the new guidelines. "But as someone who does research on global change, I recognize that there are lots of areas where it's very important that the results get out to the public. And we didn't want to ignore that aspect." Washington noted that many mathematicians saw the "impact" criterion as a possible sign that NSF was moving away from funding theoretical work, but he said NSF "has no intention" of doing so.

The new review sheet still requires a single rating for each proposal—on a five-point scale from excellent to poor—but it asks for an overall descriptive evaluation as well. It suggests how to interpret the criteria by naming issues that reviewers may address under each heading. The list for the first criterion includes the cross-disciplinary nature of the work, its creativity, and the ability of the scientist to carry out the research. The second criterion covers how well the activity promotes teaching and training, broadens participation of underrepresented groups, improves partnerships and instrumentation, and enhances public understanding of science. "These are important questions that NSF must address," says NSB President Richard Zare, a Stanford University chemist. "And the more care that people take in answering them, the better NSF can do its job."

NSF will start using the new criteria in October. Reviewers will also be sent a synopsis of NSF's strategic plan, adopted in 1995, so they can judge how a proposal squares with NSF's overall goals of supporting world-class research, disseminating the knowledge gained from it, and improving U.S. science education.

–Jeffrey Mervis