Investigating tenure controversies: Basing faculty promotion on flawed variables doesn't help the selection of competent academics.

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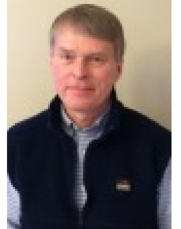

Controversies regarding whether tenure encourages a culture of incompetence have led many US institutions to tighten up their decision making procedures. But many of these attempts to repair the system reflect little empirical research. In response, **John Rothgeb** *conducted two large scale surveys across political science departments to investigate the variables that most affect the probability of denial of tenure and probability of incompetence at various US universities. The findings suggest that changes to the evaluations system are needed. But it is important to remember that tenure still remains vital to encouraging cutting-edge research.*

Tenure is a guarantee by a college/university of continuing employment if an individual meets her/his professional obligations, is morally fit, and the institution remains financially sound. In the U.S., tenure originated with the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) 1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure and was a product of the concern that the early twentieth century expansion of American higher education was undermining faculty quality and producing assaults on academic freedom. Although voluntary, the 1915 proposal and a Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure issued jointly in 1940 (updated in 1970 and subsequently) by the AAUP and the Association of American Colleges (representing administrators, now the Association of American Colleges and Universities) were widely accepted. Several reasons account for this: (1) the principles represent the work of faculty and administrators, (2) each institution determines the emphasis placed on the teaching, research, and service standards used to evaluate faculty, (3) the statements assert that scholarly work should be evaluated by qualified professionals, (4) tenure was meant to ensure that only the qualified received continuing employment, and (5) tenure protects the academic freedom essential to scholarly inquiry and teaching.

While procedures vary by institution, typically tenure is earned after a faculty member serves a probationary period. Faculty members submit an application detailing their teaching, research and publications, and service to the institution. A series of faculty committees and administrators, beginning with the candidate's department and continuing to the college and university levels, evaluates the application. If the applicant's record is acceptable, then tenure may be granted. If not, the applicant is terminated, which might end the applicant's academic career. As Van Alstyne (1971, 329) notes, tenure does not offer protection from dismissal for cause, but it does establish "a presumption of the individual's professional excellence … [that] shifts to the individual the benefit of the doubt."

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Despite the hurdles in the review process, tenure often is depicted as flawed. Among the most discussed flaws are financial commitments that can stretch for decades and reduce institutional flexibility and the possibility that incompetent faculty (those who stop meeting the teaching, research, and service expectations of their institution) are shielded from dismissal. The latter is an interesting allegation given that tenure was created in part to ensure that the incompetent would be eliminated from the profession.

The controversies associated with tenure and incompetence have led many institutions to tighten their tenure

decision making procedures and standards by requiring such things as external review letters from prominent academics to evaluate a candidate's research (see Schlozman, 1998) and multiple indicators for measuring the candidate's teaching (see Rothgeb and Burger, 2009). In addition, many colleges/universities require post-tenure reviews, which Euben (2005) points out courts have allowed to serve as a reason for dismissing tenured faculty, as in Wiest v. Kansas (2003). Some argue that these reviews can cause faculty members to forego controversial research projects to avoid troublesome reviews, thereby undermining academic freedom. By 2000, 37 states required post-tenure reviews at public institutions (Euben and Lee, 2005).

These attempts to repair tenure's flaws confront a basic problem: they are based almost entirely on conjecture and reflect little empirical research (see Marshall and Rothgeb, "So You Want Tenure? Factors Affecting Tenure Decisions In Political Science Departments" in *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44 (July) 2011, 571). For example, although institutions often require external review letters, there is virtually no systematic work showing that letters play a useful role in tenure evaluations. The same can be said of the variety of techniques used to assess teaching. As for tenure and incompetence, Euben and Lee (2005) illustrate how difficult it is to research the problem even when a college/university has a post-tenure review policy. In part, this dearth of research appears to result from concerns over legal issues and from the reluctance of administrators to discuss tenure problems, given the potential effects on institutional morale, prestige, and funding.

To sidestep these difficulties, I conducted two surveys of department chairs at over 1,200 colleges and universities throughout the U.S. Department chairs were surveyed because my previous research indicated that chairs were willing to discuss tenure issues and because scholarly work shows that chairs are well informed about how their institution handles personnel matters, including tenure (see Knight and Holen, 1985; Leslie, 1973). The surveys went to political science chairs, with addresses provided by the American Political Science Association. Hence, while they may not be as generalizable as one might wish, the results should provide benchmarks for discussing some tenure-related problems.

The first survey was conducted in the spring of 2008 and focused on how institutional characteristics, tenure evaluation procedures, and the standards used to assess teaching, research, and service affected the probability (which ranges from 1.0 (a certainty) to 0.0 (an impossibility)) that the responding department denied someone tenure (measured as yes = 1, no = 0). The response rate was 32%. Logistic regression (a statistical technique that allows for the examination of how individual variables affect a dichotomous dependent variable while controlling for other variables) was employed. Details are available from Marshall and Rothgeb (2011).

This research revealed that five variables affected the denial of tenure, with three increasing the probability of denial and two lowering it. Among the former were the number of articles a candidate was expected to publish, which increased the probability of denial by about .16 from the lowest (no articles required) to the highest (two or more articles per year) value of the variable, and whether the institution was publicly supported and had set standards to guide faculty votes in tenure cases, both of which increased the likelihood of denial by .11. The variables that lowered the probability of denial were an institutional emphasis on student advising and a willingness to treat teaching publications as equal to substantive articles, which reduced the probability of denial by .16 and .10 respectively.

The second survey, conducted in the Spring of 2010, examined how the independent variables mentioned above affected the probability that the responding institution faced the problem of tenure protecting incompetent faculty (measured as yes, tenure protects incompetent faculty at my college/university = 1, no = 0). This survey's response rate was 30%. The analysis again used logistic regression (see Rothgeb, 2014).

These results revealed that four variables affect incompetence. Two were procedural variables, including allowing collegiality to play a role in tenure decisions, which raised the probability of incompetence by .12, and whether college/university administrators and/or faculty committees had overruled positive departmental tenure recommendations, which reduced the chance of incompetence by .30. Two research variables also affected incompetence. Both pertained to the number of articles tenure candidates were required to publish. The first related

to the sheer quantity of articles. Each incremental increase in this variable, that is, from one article to two or from two to three, raised the likelihood of incompetence by .08. Across the full range of values for this variable the chance of incompetence went up by about .32. The second was the number of prestigious journal articles (as defined by the institution's evaluators) required of candidates. Here incremental increases lowered the probability of incompetence by .16, and institutions that expected candidates to publish the maximum value for this variable were approximately .64 less likely to report an incompetence problem than were those that required the minimum value.

The above discussion prompts several observations. The first is that, as noted earlier, tenure originated in the desire to eliminate incompetence, not shield it. The fact that 61 % of the respondents to the second survey stated that their institution has a problem with tenure protecting incompetence indicates that changes are needed. But it is important to remember that tenure remains vital to encouraging cutting-edge research that can advance knowledge and serve as a basis for critiquing misguided public policies and inappropriate social behavior. Hence, the focus should be on repairing, not replacing, the system.

Among the reforms these surveys point to is the need to reconsider some tenure evaluation procedures. In particular, the role of collegiality and the use of external letters should be reviewed since collegiality seems to increase the chance that less capable faculty will receive tenure and external letters may not be worth the sometimes considerable effort they involve. The one evaluation technique that does appear to work is the thorough review of positive departmental recommendations by college/university faculty committees and administrators, which may limit the possible effect of personal relationships on departmental decisions.

Another observation relates to assessing a candidate's research record. Juxtaposing the findings from the two studies indicates that the most emphasized evaluation practice in tenure decisions, the examination of the number of published articles, is also the technique that can lead to future trouble. To avoid this, tenure decision makers should reorient requirements to stress the publication of articles in the top journals in the candidate's research field.

Finally, the findings from these surveys have implications for the U.S. national education debate where some argue that private institutions are more diligent about denying tenure and less likely to face incompetence and faculty unions promote easy grants of tenure and later non-performance. The results from these two studies do not support these allegations. Unionization neither reduced the chance that tenure would be denied nor did it increase the probability that a college/university would have an incompetence problem. As for privatization, the evidence indicated that publicly supported institutions were more likely to deny tenure and that the public/private variable was not related to incompetence.

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