

TERMINATING TENURE: INSTRUCTION, INQUIRY, AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZED INTELLEGENTSIA

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The power of professors within the university has diminished dramatically in recent years as administrators have asserted dominance over university governance. Another, more disturbing trend developed simultaneously: the rising role of contingent faculty. Universities increasingly hire adjuncts to teach classes, leaving a diminished and marginalized faculty to conduct research. Right-wing demonization of tenure and the academy only encourages this trend, as it undermines the public role of the professoriate. Occasional examples of professorial negligence do not reflect broad trends in academia, and the alternatives to tenure remain less desirable. Tenure remains the most plausible way of protecting academic freedom. This paper will examine recent attacks on the professoriate and the impact of the corporatization of the university, arguing that tenure serves a vital social role in protecting intellectual inquiry and that the decline of tenure harms the academic mission of the university.

Criticisms of tenure should be considered in light of the purpose of the professoriate proffered by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). In its 1940 “Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure,” the AAUP staked out important claims about the purpose and merits of tenure:

Tenure is a means to certain ends; specifically: (1) freedom of teaching and research and of extramural activities and (2) a sufficient degree of economic security to make the profession attractive to men and women of ability. Freedom and economic security, hence, tenure, are indispensable to the success of an institution in fulfilling its obligations to its students and to society. (AAUP)

An examination of the efficacy of tenure must consider whether it meets these goals.

In a May 2011 article in the *Weekly Standard* entitled “Fat City,” retired University of Illinois Professor David Rubinstein attempts to rebut precisely these claims. Highly disparaging of professors, Rubinstein rails against what he sees as a perverse benefits system that provides disincentives to work. He places tenure at the center of this system. “The grandest prize of all is, of course, tenure,” he writes. “The tenured live in a different world than ordinary mortals, a world in which fears of unemployment are banished, futures can be confidently planned, and retirement is secure” (Rubinstein). Rubinstein decries tenure for allowing lazy professors to do little work, while receiving a great deal of compensation for it.

The publication of Rubinstein's article inspired a brief frenzy in the blogosphere: right-wing pundits seized on Rubinstein's piece, while academics and progressives decried it. Conservative critics of the academy, like Charlotte Allen, a *National Review* columnist, saw Rubinstein's story as evidence for the stereotype of the lazy professor. Allen wrote gleefully that "[t]he article was a hoot and a half," lauding Rubinstein for revealing the truth about tenure (C. Allen). Progressive commentators, by contrast, found nothing funny in the article. Academic bloggers such as Andrew Gelman and Brad DeLong and progressive bloggers such as Matthew Yglesias criticized the article for misrepresenting the academy and presenting a flawed, one-sided view of tenure.

Rubinstein levels three key arguments against tenure: that it allows professors to neglect teaching and research, that it causes universities to overpay professors who contribute little to society, and that it fails to support academic freedom. He justifies each of these claims on the basis of firsthand experience. Supporting his first claim, he writes, "Before retiring, I carried a teaching load of two courses per semester: six hours of lecture a week. I usually scheduled classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays: The rest of the week was mine. Colleagues who pursued grants taught less, some rarely seeing a classroom" (Rubinstein). Examining the amount of time he spent working outside of class, Rubinstein claims that because he could reuse notes from year to year he spent little more than 20 minutes preparing for class.

In an article in the *New York Review of Books*, "Colleges: An Endangered Species?" Columbia Professor of American Studies Andrew Delbanco discusses the impact of tenure on teaching, concurring with Rubinstein's assessment that it threatens the quality of undergraduate teaching. Delbanco examines the historical context of tenure, writing that in the early twentieth century, "[f]aculty began to benefit from competitive recruitments in what was becoming a national system of linked campuses; and when some rival university came wooing, the first thing to bargain for was, of course, a reduced teaching load" (Delbanco). Delbanco associates competition for top professors with reduction of teaching responsibilities. Professors want to conduct research rather than to teach undergraduates, he suggests. Thus, he claims that competition for tenured professors detracts from the teaching mission of the academy by allowing top professors to ignore teaching in favor of research.

Questioning the relevance and importance of the work that professors produce, Rubinstein criticizes tenure for causing universities to pay professors large sums for doing little to benefit society. "My main task as a university professor was self-cultivation," he writes (Rubinstein). Rubinstein argues that professors with "esoteric academic interests" (Rubinstein studied the social theory of Marx and Wittgenstein) contribute little to society, observing that "the readership of academic journals is tiny . . . and most of this work had no impact beyond a small circle of interested academics" (Rubinstein). Yet these professors receive exorbitant compensation because they have tenure, he suggests. Rubinstein argues that professors fail to connect their highly

technical and specialized research to the academic needs of students and that this contributes to professors' neglect of their teaching responsibilities.

Finally, Rubinstein argues that tenure stifles academic freedom by creating a culture of intellectual homogeneity. Rubinstein, a conservative, worries that faculties are dominated by left-wing ideologues and do not accept members who disagree with them. He attacks his discipline, sociology, and the university itself for an alleged culture of political one-sidedness and even extremism. Tenured professors are overwhelmingly Democrats, he claims, while his own discipline is dominated by Marxists. He cites a study by Harvard Professor Neil Gross that finds that 87.6 percent of social scientists voted for Kerry, while only 6.2 percent voted for Bush in the 2004 Presidential election (Rubinstein). Rubinstein adds that "Gross also found that 25 percent of sociologists characterize themselves as Marxists, likely a higher percentage than members of the Chinese Communist party." Rubinstein worries that this climate of increasingly homogenous orthodoxy does not allow the academy to fulfill its mission of providing academic freedom.

Jonathan Cole, a Columbia professor, agrees that this presents a problem. "Tenure does provide limited protection from formal sanctions for scholars taking on generally ideologically prohibited subjects. But it does not secure those same scholars from contempt from their colleagues," he writes (Cole 497). Although Cole is no conservative, he agrees tentatively with Rubinstein that the current state of tenure does pose some obstacles to complete academic freedom. While Cole thinks that additional measures might help protect academic freedom, he still maintains that the framework of tenure is broadly favorable to academic freedom (Cole 64).

Rubinstein is most obviously mistaken in his first claim. Rubinstein's former colleagues were quick to take him to task for his claim that tenured professors generally neglect their teaching and research responsibilities. Fellow University of Illinois sociologists Barbara Risman, William Bridges, and Anthony Orum write,

The reason that talented people are eager to enter the teaching profession is because they are passionate about doing new research and imparting their knowledge to young men and women, not because they expect to lead a life of leisure and affluence. Faculty members are hired only after they have accumulated evidence of their research expertise and their teaching excellence . . . After that, they serve six-year apprenticeships as assistant professors, with absolutely no assurance they will be accepted into the ranks of senior faculty. Some burn out, as Rubinstein obviously did. But most care passionately both about their research and their students. Most work far more than a 40-hour week, taking home student papers and research projects over the weekend, during school closures, and more recently, during mandated furlough periods. (qtd. in Halper)

Substantial evidence supports this view of the professoriate. An article by the AAUP confirms that “[r]ecent studies of faculty workload show average faculty workweeks at four-year institutions ranging from 52-57 hours” (“The Work of Faculty” 36). The report also notes that even at public universities professors dedicate on average 29 percent of their time to research and 43 percent to teaching (37). Another study found similar results, reporting that “tenure-track faculty generate a much larger proportion of undergraduate teaching activity than might be expected” (Middaugh 1). While, as Delbanco argues, universities pay professors primarily to conduct research, Gelman points out that most people who become teachers do so because they enjoy teaching (“Looking For a Purpose”). Tenured faculty devote substantial time to undergraduate teaching nationwide. The US Department of Education found that sixty-nine percent of tenured faculty and seventy-one percent of tenure-track faculty teach undergraduate courses in a given semester (Chen 106), compared to seventy-seven percent of “instructional faculty and staff” (103). Though, as Delbanco suggests, many famous professors could easily negotiate contracts that would exempt them from teaching undergraduates entirely, the regularity with which many tenured professors teach undergraduate courses suggests that they enjoy doing so.

Moreover, tenured professors are more effective teachers because of their relevant research expertise. Despite Delbanco’s claim that undergraduate teaching has become distanced from research, students have a lot to gain from interactions with tenured professors. Cary Nelson, English professor and president of the AAUP, concurs with this point, writing that “[t]enured faculty members also have a reason to feel strong institutional loyalty and to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their students. The decline of tenure goes hand-in-hand with a decline in the quality of education. Poor teaching conditions produce poor learning conditions” (“Why College Students”). Studies have found that research in relevant areas improves professors’ teaching (Colbeck 647), particularly in the humanities (Smeby 5). Thus, Cole observes that “[e]xcellence in teaching and excellence in research are compatible and mutually reinforcing” (112). “The best researchers are also among the most brilliant lecturers or mentors of students. These are the producers of fresh ideas who are truly at the cutting edge of their disciplines and who can give their students a sense of excitement about scholarship at the research frontier,” he writes (112). Additionally, while junior faculty suffer from a “publish or perish” mentality that forces them to focus on their research (Donoghue 38), tenured faculty have the leisure to focus on teaching. This, along with their greater experience, may help explain the better teaching of senior faculty.

Ironically, even Rubinstein admits he did not neglect his research. He points out, “The last professional paper I published—after my promotion—was accepted by the leading journal in my field.” And he notes that “a (small) literature has clustered around some of my work” (qtd. in Halper). Gelman confirms this, noting that “Google Scholar shows some citations” and concluding that “Rubinstein was a moderately productive scholar at a middling-rank university—not a scholarly ‘slacker’” (“Looking

for a purpose”). Defending himself against colleagues’ criticisms, Rubinstein also points out he received awards for his research. This undermines Rubinstein’s claim further. He admits that his “article was about what is possible in the system” (qtd. in Halper). Yet he provides no evidence that professors fail to conduct research, and evidence suggests rather the opposite (AAUP, “The Work” 39).

While Rubinstein argues that tenure results in professors being overpaid, Gelman refutes this claim. In a June 1, 2011 post on his blog, *Statistical Modeling, Causal Inference, and Social Science*, Gelman, a Columbia statistics professor, considers Rubinstein’s article, examining the claim that tenure results in excessive salaries for professors. Gelman considers tenure a necessary incentive to induce professors to enter the profession, rather than the private sector. Indeed, Rubinstein admits that academics are underpaid in comparison to private sector employees. He claims, however, that “[t]he rarity of quits and the abundance of applications is good evidence that the life of the college professor is indeed enviable.” Gelman responds by pointing out the competition among universities for top professors. “From an economic view, this makes sense,” he writes. “If you want to get the best people, you need to compete” (“The ‘Cushy Life’”). Gelman’s claim seems reasonable: tenure is an incentive to attract good professors. Without tenure, universities would need to provide professors with other incentives, such as higher salaries.

Further, Rubinstein’s colleagues provide an important defense of the role of academic research. “As Rubinstein admits, it takes painstaking research and revision to get published in academic journals,” they write; and

policy-makers, journalists, other teachers, NGOs, research departments in private businesses, and other interested parties rely on the journals, precisely because they are so rigorously vetted, to get the latest research and best practice findings. In turn they get the information out to wider audiences or use it in ways that benefit the public” (qtd. in Halper).

This analysis suggests that research has a valuable social function.

Rubinstein’s final claim, that tenure hinders academic freedom, presents the most compelling challenge. Nelson addresses this issue in a recent article in the *Key Reporter*, writing, “A college must be a place where students and faculty can freely question the beliefs many other citizens take for granted. They must be able to criticize the campus administration and the state and national government without fear of reprisal” (“Why College Students”). He goes on to warn that “[t]he erosion of tenure means that thousands of [junior] faculty members are vulnerable to administrative, political, or religious pique and whim” (“Why College Students”). This is not an atmosphere conducive to the exercise of academic freedom. Nelson elaborates on this theme in his 2010 book, *No University Is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom*, arguing that if professors must fear reprisals for their criticisms, such criticisms will not be voiced.

“If they can fire you for what you say, you really do not have academic freedom, either in the classroom or in print,” he writes (*No University Is an Island* 165–166).

There are simply no compelling alternatives to tenure. University of California, Berkeley philosopher John Searle proposes a dubious alternative in his book *The Campus War: A Sympathetic Look at the University in Agony*. “The way to protect the job of the professor from political interference,” he writes, “is to place sovereignty over the university in the hands of the faculty” (230). If the faculty were given sovereignty, Searle suggests, it could replace tenure with a system of contracts, with professors receiving their first contract after a brief probationary period and colleagues reviewing them every seven years to ensure that they continued to focus on their teaching and research. Searle diagnoses correctly a major problem with the tenure process, which is indeed “intolerably long” (230). Further, this period functions unfortunately “as a kind of breaking-in period [because] after such a long time, the young professor is likely to be less of a threat to the old guard who run the department than if he were still young and full of fight” (Searle 231). Searle’s proposed solution, shortening the probationary period, seems appropriate. However, abolishing tenure remains problematic. Even if academics were given control of the university, abolishing tenure would still prevent professors from exercising fully their academic freedom because it would put them at risk of retribution from their senior colleagues who would review their contracts. Still, Searle’s alternative would work better than the alternative to which many universities are today resorting.

Universities increasingly rely on contingent faculty to teach classes. In part, this is because poorly paid adjunct professors provide a cheap source of labor. Yet universities may have ulterior motives. As the AAUP notes, “Though budget-driven, and not at first instance seen as political or intellectual assaults on academic freedom or tenure, such measures are intended to be intrusive” (“The Work of Faculty” 38). This suggests that states have decreased budgets for public universities in order to limit the influence of academics, perhaps with ulterior political motives. Christopher Newfield adopts this argument in his 2008 book, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class*, in which he argues that conservative operatives launched a crusade against the academy in order to limit the proliferation of intellectuals’ work and to prevent social mobility for the middle class. “The Right’s culture warriors did not openly attack the economic position of the middle class, but they did attack the university,” he writes;

In doing so, they created the conditions for repeated budget cuts to the core middle-class institution. More fundamentally, they discredited the cultural conditions of mass-middle-class development, downsized the influence of its leading institution, the university, and reduced the social and political impacts of knowledge workers overall (Newfield 11). On the basis of their criticisms of the

academy, conservatives campaigned successfully to reduce expenditures on public universities, often resulting in de facto privatization (Newfield 193).

Rubinstein's attack on tenure—and the ensuing commotion among conservative pundits—appears a symptom of this phenomenon.

Henry Lee Allen proposes another explanation, writing that because “tenure implies freedom and professional autonomy from administrators, trustees, or legislators,” the reason for the decline of tenure is clear: tenure obstructs administrative control (H.L. Allen 104). Indeed, in the last few decades, university administrators have dramatically curtailed the influence of faculties on university governance. Benjamin Ginsberg documents this phenomenon in his recent book *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*, in which he argues that universities have become corporatized by administrators who care only about attracting clients and not at all about academic freedom (198). Administrators see faculties as nuisances and have tried to marginalize them by hiring disempowered contingent faculty with no job security (Nelson, *No University* 56). Adjuncts pose no threat to administrative power (Nelson, *No University* 57). Adjuncts are also less effective teachers, spending less time preparing for class and significantly less time interacting with students outside of class and challenging students significantly less than do tenure-track professors (Umbach 102). Nelson cites similar evidence, noting that the problem “is not with the [contingent] faculty themselves but rather with their terms and conditions of employment, which do not enable part-time faculty ‘to involve themselves adequately in promoting student learning’” (*No University* 85).

The growth of administration has weakened the professoriate within the university, with harmful consequences for the academy's vitality. Nelson observes that “[t]he rise of a separate class of career administrators and the substantial increase in their sheer numbers has helped fuel the belief that faculty are not full partners in the educational enterprise but rather resources to be controlled and managed. As Marc Bousquet argues, the administrative class increasingly conceives of itself as higher education's true vanguard” (*No University* 56). Heightened administrative oversight challenges faculty governance, potentially threatening the future of tenure (Nelson, *No University* 56). In jeopardizing tenure, the rise of administrators also challenges the academic mission of the university. Ginsberg warns that “Controlled by administrators . . . the university can never be more than what Stanley Aronowitz has aptly termed a knowledge factory, offering more or less sophisticated forms of vocational training to meet the needs of other established institutions in the public and private sectors” (Ginsberg 3). Preserving the academy as a space outside of market relations, a protected domain in which academics can pursue the truth without fear of political or bureaucratic intervention, requires ensuring the vitality of a tenured professoriate.

The rise of contingent faculty has had disastrous repercussions for academic freedom. Because of their lack of job security, non-tenure track professors often

“practice elaborate self-censorship to avoid offending students, parents, or administrators” (Nelson, *No University* 166). Nelson draws attention to the failure of tenured faculty to defend their contingent colleagues. He observes that

[f]aculty with secure jobs have nonetheless themselves also paid a price for the fundamental disempowerment of large segments of their colleagues. A fragmented tenured faculty has no deep experience of solidarity to draw on and little collective experience of asserting its rights” (Nelson, *No University* 166).

The disempowerment of faculty in turn contributes to the dominance of administrators in university governance, with deleterious ramifications for academic freedom: “The parameters of academic freedom are thus often set by senior administrators, rather than by faculty discussion and consensus. Administrative tolerance for progressive pedagogy, should external critiques of such pedagogy gain political power, will be nonexistent on many campuses” (Nelson, *No University* 166). The decline of faculty governance goes hand in hand with the decline of tenure, contributing to the loss of academic freedom and thereby compromising the university’s academic mission.

Without tenure, universities would educate students less effectively and produce less research. Both students and society at large would suffer from the decrease in the production and dissemination of valuable knowledge and the reduction in critical perspectives on social issues. Even though some professors may abuse the current system of tenure, tenure remains essential because it protects professors from pressure to obscure the truth and allows them to do their work free from censorship. Tenure is and will remain central to the functioning of a free and socially valuable academy.

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