

Editorial

A formula for disaster: Tenure plus the demise of mandatory retirement

Academic tenure and mandatory retirement are systems that have, individually, advantages and disadvantages. But combine the end of mandatory retirement (December 31, 1993) with the present poorly enforced tenure system, and disaster looms for many universities.

Tenure is a valuable protection for university faculty from termination for causes related to academic freedom. But a tenure contract should not mean, as some teachers would like to believe, everlasting job security. Some conditions, including satisfactory performance of assigned duties, must be met for the employment contract to be continued. Tenure should not, and does not, protect a faculty member from being terminated for "cause." Sexual misconduct, unprofessional conduct, neglect of duties, and insubordination are some of the causes for the termination of a tenured faculty member.

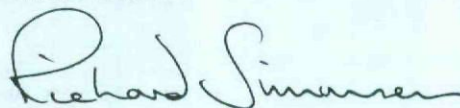
In reality, termination of a tenured faculty member is extremely rare, and most tenured teachers and researchers undoubtedly feel, with some justification, as if they have a job for life. Although many outstanding university faculty members remain productive throughout careers spanning many decades, a substantial number of teachers at our dental schools abuse the tenure system by becoming less productive as the years pass. One can partially assess this by comparing the number of recent publications from those seeking tenure to the number of recent publications from those who have tenure.

In the past, when the system was abused, the only recourse was to wait until the faculty member in question reached mandatory retirement age. Hallelujah! What a blessing mandatory retirement has been to some schools. Now, however, with the emphasis in society to protect all groups, it is regarded as age discrimination to have a mandatory retirement age. As of the end of 1993, when the Age Discrimination in Employment Act is enacted, tenured faculty members will not be subject to mandatory retirement. How will this function in combination with the present tenure system? Sounds like a sweet deal for some individuals—but a disaster for some institutions.

We are faced with the daunting prospect of professors who remain in their jobs until death do them part. In some cases this will provide an extremely valuable resource for students and young faculty alike. Theoretically, however, we could end up with a faculty composed entirely of teachers more than 70 years old. Is this fair to the students? The incorporation of new knowledge into curricula necessitates the challenging of, and oftentimes the painful separation from, long-cherished beliefs. The champions of change tend to be younger than the dictators of dogma. Surely, then, a faculty with a mixture of age, experience, and youthful enthusiasm is desirable.

If universities were good at policing themselves, and regularly dismissed incompetent faculty members, the tenure system might work—but they are not, and they do not, so it does not. It takes courage, and a belief in the system, to accuse a colleague of not living up to the expectations of the tenure privilege. Enforcing the privilege, therefore, is no easy task. If the beneficial aspects of the tenure system are to survive, a system of periodic performance review must be followed.

What is needed is an urgent reevaluation of the tenure system before the graying of the faculty goes too far. The present tenure system should be abandoned in favor of a system that can objectively assess whether individual performance meets appropriate standards. Academic freedom could be protected by a special all-university committee. Renewal of contracts should be on the basis of annual performance appraisals considered over a 5-year period. Only in this, or some similar, way can we be assured of the innovative, high-quality teaching programs and the appropriate retention of experience and influx of youthful enthusiasm that the dental students of the future deserve.



Richard J. Simonsen
Editor-in-Chief