

How do you get tenure?

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As a tenured academic in the US, Toby Miller is clear about

its value and equally clear about the need to protect its status.

Tenure is a real prize in the US academy. Most academic positions are casualised - freeway professors darting about from campus to campus in their cars - or short-term - glorified 'post-docs' who are lab rats for godhead profs, or cannon fodder for humanities teaching. But get a tenure-track job at a research-one university and your future is set. You're in your early 30s, you have six years to prove yourself, and then you have a job for life. One of the lucky ones. Or are you?

I spend a lot of my time writing evaluations of applicants for tenure and promotion from assistant to associate professor at other schools. Last year, I did 11 of these things for different universities, in everything from music to African-American studies. I received lengthy dockets in each case - the candidates' publications; their teaching evaluations; and their statements of research productivity and plans. I am not paid to undertake these evaluations, which require many, many hours of work - you're reading books, articles, conference papers, and so on, then writing several pages of critical engagement that will be read by several committees, senior administrators, and (in redacted form, in public institutions) by applicants themselves. Then there is the prospect of legal battles as well, should tenure not be granted.

Meanwhile, candidates snake around their departments for 18 months, wondering whether the meetings they see that have been convened by their senior colleagues are about them, and if so, what is being said. They are observed while in class; their behaviour in committees is scrutinised; they share gossip about others in similar situations; as various votes are taken about them they either hear the totals or do not, along with who voted how and why; and they become frazzled. No wonder - if they fail to get tenure, they're sacked.

What is the point of all this? There are really three reasons for it. The first is the concept of academic freedom, that tenure permits scholars to speak up in the public interest without fear of losing their jobs. This is especially important in the workplace. The much-vaunted First Amendment doesn't cover speech on the job: employer power is everything in the US. It is equally important because uncomfortable facts about science and international politics are routinely squashed by governments and the bourgeois press. The second reason is that tenure ties faculty to places they might otherwise never stay, and in positions that offer more security but less remuneration than they could command in corporate America. Finally, for those of us from outside the US, tenure enables our claims to residency here, based on the need of our skills.

Arguments against tenure are that it is inefficient as per the beliefs of neoclassical economics, because permanent employment complicates shifting resources to areas of new demand; and that precious few academics actually speak up in the public interest. Public universities are often threatened with losing the capacity to grant tenure by their state legislatures. The threat generally goes away when it is pointed out that stellar faculty will simply leave if this happens, and when the faculty mobilise against such moves.

For the moment, tenure remains a prize in a country where lay-offs and furloughs from jobs are routine, and

where the decision to become a professor is frequently akin to joining the ranks of the gentry poor. Academia is a vocation, a drive to inquiry and teaching; it is a passion that pulls people through their student loans, their infantilisation, their deferment of breeding, and their consignment to little and large campus towns dotted throughout the fly-over states (places that professionals pass over en route to California or New York).

I'm glad I have tenure since it permits me to live here permanently, emboldens my op-ed pieces, protects my critiques of US imperialism, and confers status - thereby permitting me to weigh in on behalf of emergent discourses and people who are trying to do new things in their work. But I see littered around me the costs of it: loads of not very productive, middle-ranking tenured people with lousy alibis for their failure to publish judging loads of very productive junior people frightened that their output will never be enough to qualify for tenure.

On balance, we need tenure, because good jobs are being turned into bad ones via the crisis of employment that universities engender in order to allocate funds away from professors and towards administrators; away from very good but ordinary profs towards stellar, exceptional ones; and away from the humanities and social sciences and towards engineering, medicine, law, business, and basic science. It's one of the tools we have to form a bloc, and it must be protected, for all the mundane middle who shouldn't have it.

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