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Grant Tenure to Tenure

Quite recently, Mark Regnerus, a professor of sociology at the University of Texas-Austin, published some controversial research. In his findings, Regnerus asserted that opposite-sex households may be better for children than same-sex households. The findings were peer reviewed, verified by other experts, and supported by compelling reasoning. Nevertheless, the study was not taken well. The LGBT community interpreted it as an attack, and many called for his removal. Despite that, Mark Regnerus was never fired. Because he had already procured the position of tenure, the university could not remove him for this controversial publication. Indeed, as a writer for Inside Higher Ed claimed, “Fortunately, Mark Regnerus is protected by tenure” (qtd. In Eissenman). Without tenure, Mark Regnerus would have lost his job for publishing the conclusion of legitimate and relevant research. He would have been silenced because he dared to search for uncomfortable truth. The practice of tenure has been a cornerstone of U.S. universities for decades, but recently it has fallen under attack. It is paramount to recognize that tenure is vital to protecting the academic freedom and quality of American universities. Its decline represents a serious issue in American colleges, because without it our professors cannot effectively pursue the discovery, discussion, and dissemination of truth.

Tenure was first instituted in 1940 when the American Association of University Professors wrote “The Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure” (McPherson

and Shapiro). Because of the influential document, Russel Eissenman explained that tenured professors can still be fired but that “It is much more difficult than if these faculty members did not have tenure” (Eissenman). The AAUP statement provided tenured professors with job protection and due process, which allows them to teach ideas and research subjects that are unpopular.

The decline of tenure has been sudden and shocking. In 1975, only 30 percent of college faculty was part-time (Chait 127). That meant that the other 70 percent had either achieved tenure or was on track to receive tenure. Now, only 35 percent of college faculty is on a tenure track (Donoghue 56). This decline can be attributed to external pressure and financial questions. As Richard Chait declared, “Tenure is a dangerous anachronism” (Chait 125). He continued his attack by claiming that tenure “should be abolished” (Chait 125). In the face of mounting pressure, tenure is slowly disappearing, and that is a threat to the freedom and quality of American universities.

The protection of tenure is necessary for professors who have ideas that conflict with the interests of their peers. If their ideas are expressed, professors may be subject to suppression in the form of being fired. Eissenman argues this point, stating, “A professor with controversial ideas may be seen as a threat to enrollment and thus subject to retaliation by the college.” The ultimate responsibility of higher education is the pursuit of truth, and without tenure, this duty is compromised.

Truth can only change society if it can be communicated to the general public. Professors must be able to publish their findings, and tenure gives them the confidence to do so. As Aeon Skoble and Steven Horowitz explained, “Tenure protects academic freedom ... when we engage in research and publishing, we can’t be worried that some administrator, trustee, politician, or

even a student activist will find our work offensive and retaliate against us” (Skoble and Horowitz). The absence of tenure jeopardizes research that might be true but unpopular.

Some argue that part-time professors receive enough academic freedom to accomplish their responsibilities. This may be true for some universities, but in most instances, this is not the case. Nicole Monnier, a social studies professor, declares that “Non-tenure-track faculty will tell you, many of their institutions don't offer even theoretical protection, let alone ... policies that might protect their academic freedom in those spaces” (Monnier). With the erosion of tenure, we usher in a professorate that cannot discover, discuss, and disseminate truth like it should be able.

Without tenure, our professors would be a shadow of themselves. They would operate simply as an extension of the worldview of the college—too worried to surface ideas or findings that are true but unpopular. Furthermore, in the absence of tenure, colleges might find that the quality of their professorate declines significantly. R. Kim Craft, and her co-authors argue that tenure gives colleges a valuable tool to recruit and retain quality faculty. They also point out that this comes at a cheaper price, quietly dismantling the financial arguments against tenure. (Craft, Et. al). Indubitably, the distinct benefits of having tenure are attractive to the most qualified professors.

Graduation rates illustrate this phenomenon. A study conducted by professors Ronald Ehrenberg and Liang Zhang show that colleges with more part-time faculty tend to have lower four-year graduation rates. Their findings “suggest that the increased usage of these faculty types does adversely affect graduation rates at four-year colleges” (Ehrenberg and Zhang). Their conclusion is alarming when viewed in the context of disintegrating tenure. In the absence of tenure, it is difficult to attract excellent faculty, and without high quality professors, the condition of education will deteriorate.

Opponents of this position contend that tenure protects incompetent professors. They argue that professors with tenure are lazy, spend too much time on research, rather than students, and do not focus on improving their courses. Professor George Roig articulates why that viewpoint is inaccurate. “Tenure is not the problem,” he states, because professors do not just become “unaccountable or immune from the consequences of their own incompetence” (Roig). Roig then articulates what many critics fail to recognize: “Tenured professors can be fired for not doing their job, just like anyone else” (Roig). Certainly, there are tenured professors who are lazy and incompetent—the same could be said about practically anyone occupation. Because of this, just like all of their peers, tenured professors can be fired. Professors with tenure are not lackadaisical and incapable, as many opponents would have you believe.

The misconception of many critics is this: tenure ensures employment for life. While it is easy to conceive of tenure that way, it is simply not true. Tenured professors can still be fired if they are doing a poor job. However, tenure does ensure that professors are given due process. Basically, a college cannot arbitrarily fire a professor with tenure. The university must present a legitimate reason before that professor is removed. This assurance of due process is paramount to the protection of academic integrity.

The importance of academic freedom cannot be overstated. As the Supreme Court wrote in the majority opinion for *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*: “The essentiality of freedom in the community of American universities is almost self-evident” (23). In a six to two decision, the Justices ruled that “Impos[ing] any strait jacket upon the intellectual leaders in our colleges and universities would imperil the future of our Nation ... Teachers and students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate ... otherwise our civilization will stagnate and die” (23).

The justices predicted that a society without academic freedom would be doomed. Their prediction is something we must heed when considering the decline of tenure.

As college students, we hold a unique position. The universities rely on our dollars and support in order to function effectively, which gives us powerful leverage. We must make it clear to colleges that we endorse tenure, and the educational quality and academic freedom that comes with it. The decline of tenure is an issue, and we must make it clear that it is time to grant tenure to tenure.

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