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Academic Careers in the Twenty First Century: New Options for Faculty

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Abstract

The faculty career is changing in response to external and internal pressures. Public calls for productivity and accountability, student demands for access and high quality education, faculty workloads, tenure criteria and processes, and the desire for balance in personal and professional lives are all contributing to change. Today less than 50% of all faculty members occupy tenure-track positions; 26% of full-time faculty occupy nontenurable positions. This paper examines these and other pressures for institutional change, describes current faculty demographics, and explores possible institutional responses including modifications to traditional tenure systems and faculty career alternatives outside tenure.

Here I am, invited to talk about changes in the faculty career. I sure am an expert on change right now because I am in the midst of changing careers myself! After twenty-five years as an administrator with occasional research and teaching assignments, I am now a full-time professor in an academic department for the first time. I should be listening to you tell me how the system works rather than speaking to you about how to change it! As I learn first hand about what faculty do: figure out how to structure their time to accomplish **everything**, search for parking, beg, borrow and occasionally steal clerical support, and compete for carefully guarded and sacred budget allocations, I am very personally aware of how difficult career change can be.

But, change is a reality we all face. So with heightened personal empathy and understanding garnered over the last several months, I will spend my time today talking about why and how I see the faculty career changing. I do this primarily from the perspective of my own research including my recent affiliation with the American Association for Higher Education's New Pathways Project which has explored many facets of faculty careers and employment arrangements and published 14 different working papers.

Today I want to talk about three key points:

- There are too many public and institutional reasons to continue the same tenure system promulgated by the AAUP in 1940.
- The demographics of the faculty are already changing. The question is whether we are going to manage this change or just let it happen.
- The task before us all—administrators and faculty within institutions—is to explore modifications to tenure and alternatives outside tenure that could better meet the needs of faculty members and their colleges and universities.

Before we begin, let's make sure we share the same definition of tenure. As promulgated by the American As-

sociation of University Professors in their 1940 "Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure" (1990), tenure was for the purpose of guaranteeing academic freedom and a reasonable amount of economic security. The tenure system, as defined by the AAUP, was applied to everyone, and it worked fine while the higher education establishment was small and relatively homogeneous. And, as higher education gained in public esteem and prospered financially during the 1950's, 60's and 70's (the era in which today's senior faculty entered the career), the academic profession was attractive to capable and ambitious faculty members (Bowen and Schuster, 1986). A huge demand for faculty gave a freshly recruited cohort of professors the leverage to negotiate their salaries, workloads and rewards. Since the early 1970's, however, the appeal of the academic profession has diminished along with the economic flexibility to offer faculty attractive salaries and working conditions. At the same time, the higher education enterprise has grown enormously and diversified. While the "one size fits all" tenure system, as defined in the 1940 AAUP Statement, is still viewed by some as the model for all institutions, it is no longer accepted by the public or meets the needs of individual colleges and universities.

The question now is how to retain the key features of tenure, academic freedom and some measure of job security, when higher education itself has changed so dramatically since 1940.

The Current Context

Within institutions tenure policies are undergoing changes brought about by legitimate and pervasive external and internal concerns.

External Concerns

The public widely views tenure as a shelter for underproductive and overcompensated academics, and tenure's

role in protecting academic freedom with concomitant economic security is poorly understood (Gappa and Leslie, 1997). State legislators and others are insisting on greater accountability and measurement of faculty productivity through workload studies and requirements or post-tenure reviews because of a perceived lack of fit between faculty priorities and institutional missions (Heydinger and Simsek, 1992). The guarantee of life-long employment resulting from the elimination of the mandatory retirement age is viewed as an anomaly.

Demand for access. Demand for access is escalating while resources are declining. The public is saying we are the customers and we want our children taught by professors. We want high quality undergraduate education and applied research and service aimed at meeting society's needs (Gappa and Leslie, 1997).

Competition. Today, the entertainment industry is a primary supplier of education for our students. A steady diet of engaging, fast-paced information via television and the world wide web has given students and their parents implicit criteria for judging the presentation of material (Heydinger and Simsek, 1992). Students now want learning that is customized—high quality, just in time, life-long. Traditional approaches to teaching and learning are being challenged successfully by corporate entities and for profit educational institutions such as the University of Phoenix.

Changing work force. Employees no longer expect life-long employment with one organization or trust major decisions affecting their careers to a "parent" organization. Instead, working under a new covenant, employers give individuals opportunities to enhance their employability in exchange for increased productivity and some degree of commitment to company purpose for as long as the employee works there (Waterman, Waterman and Collard, 1994). This new covenant is in sharp contrast to academic tenure. In addition, employees today are generally members of family units with more than one worker. They seek work-life balance in their careers to meet their dual responsibilities.

Internal Context

Internal concerns about tenure are equally pervasive and legitimate.

Institutional flexibility. A guarantee of life-long employment can seriously erode institutional flexibility while a rewards structure that seeks to emulate the research paradigm no matter what the institutions' mission or customers' desires raises serious questions about whether faculty are citizens of their disciplines or citizens of their institutions. Boyer's works, *Scholarship Reconsidered* (Boyer, 1990) and *Scholarship Assessed* (Glassick, Huber and Maeroff, 1997) are serving as important change agents to realign faculty priorities and allow more paths for faculty achievement and rewards.

The nature of faculty work. Contrary to popular belief, faculty work hard. A survey of professors at a large techni-

cal university found that the median workweek is 60 hours and 10% of faculty spend 75 hours a week at their jobs (Bailyn, 1993). As faculty we love our jobs because of the autonomy and independence. But we pay a price for them. Our work is fragmented into multiple demands for our time and high expectations for performance. Students expect consistent excellent faculty performance in the classroom, and faculty cannot easily find replacements when they are sick or have emergencies. As good academic citizens, faculty are expected to serve on committees and meet other departmental, campus and professional service obligations. Simultaneously, they must produce research and scholarly work. Yet the mental requirements for research (concentration, uninterrupted periods of time, and meeting productivity schedules for grants or publications) conflict with the expectations faculty face for being available to students and performing various service functions (Gappa and MacDermid 1997; Bailyn, 1993).

The bottom line is that there is not enough time to do everything that needs to be done. Bailyn calls the work psychologically difficult:

The lack of ability to limit work, the tendency to compare oneself primarily to the exceptional giants in one's field, and the high incidence of overload, make it particularly difficult for academics to find a satisfactory integration of work with private life...It is the unbounded nature of the academic career that is the heart of the problem. Time is critical for professors because there is not enough of it to do all the things their job requires: teaching, research and institutional and professional service. It is therefore impossible for faculty to protect other aspects of their lives (1993, pp. 51-52).

The career path to tenure. For probationary faculty, the clock is always ticking towards an arbitrary seven-year deadline. Tenure track faculty lack control over their time, and the pressure to meet tenure criteria requires them to pursue research and scholarship that can result in sufficient publications within the allotted time frame.

Experiences during the probationary period are influenced by the culture of the institution and department. Colleges and universities are decentralized entities. Depending on the institution, the culture can be institutionally based, department based, or both! Some departments foster collegiality and pride themselves on mentoring, fairness, continuous feedback, and creating trust. Others are the reverse—the feedback is inconsistent, messages about criteria are unclear or changing, and the climate is competitive, political or schismatic. Changes in committee composition or department heads can lead to changes in departmental environments and discontinuity in feedback and expectations midway through probation.

Work-life balance. Increasingly men and women faculty are seeking a more realistic balance between work and life (Gappa and MacDermid, 1997). This is particularly dif-

difficult for faculty on tenure track—and these faculty, both men and women tend to be from more diverse backgrounds and have different expectations. In a decentralized institution, the level of use of work-family programs is, in part, dependent on the perceived career penalties. The lack of widespread acceptance and use of work-life programs by early career faculty and the lack of understanding of work-family conflicts by departments can have devastating effects.

Use of part-time, nontenurable appointments. The tenure system exists, in part, because part-timers provide a cheap, plentiful source of labor that does the work tenured faculty do not want to do. But the rising use of part-time faculty to deliver a larger and larger portion of undergraduate education only sharpens the questions the public is asking and raises questions about whether the academic work force may have become too fragmented. Do differences in status now split faculty away from one another and from the idea of a community of scholars (Gappa and Leslie, 1997)?

Preserving academic freedom. Academic freedom is critical to higher education. It is the backbone of the tenure system. But, it is difficult to defend tenure for the purpose of preserving academic freedom when only about 34% of all faculty (on a head count basis) are tenured. Some institutions extend academic freedom to members of the professoriate as they define that group (Gappa, 1996), and some scholars have proposed ways of preserving academic freedom short of awarding tenure (Byrne, 1997).

Faculty Demographics

Now we will look at some faculty demographics to illustrate the extent of changes in the faculty career. These data are head count, not full-time faculty equivalents, and they are inclusive of all institutional types. They are taken from the 1993 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty which includes data by institutional type and discipline for those of you who want to examine these demographics in more detail (Zimble, 1994; NEA, 1995; Finkelstein et al., 1995; Leslie, 1995; Kirshstein et al., 1996).

- 42% of all faculty are part-time.
- 74% of all full-time faculty are tenured or on tenure track.
- 64% of full-time faculty hired in the last five years are tenurable.
- 26% of full-timers are nontenurable, either because their institutions do not grant tenure or because their appointments specifically state they are nontenurable.

Therefore, fewer than 50% of all faculty are tenurable.

- 60% of men faculty, compared with 28% of women faculty, have tenure.
- Medical schools use the most full-time nontenurable faculty. By 1981, 75% of U. S. medical schools had nontenurable faculty tracks.

Since part-timers have doubled in numbers in the past two decades and constitute such a large share of the total faculty (42%) (Leslie, 1998), we'll take a quick look at their characteristics:

- Only 4% are tenured or tenure track.
- 44% are in public two-year colleges, 6% are in liberal arts colleges, 22% are in comprehensive regional institutions, 11% are in doctoral universities, and 11% are in research universities. However, if the work of teaching assistants is added to that of part-timers in research universities, it would probably show that proportionately as many undergraduates are taught by nontenurable faculty at research institutions as at other institutions (Leslie, 1995, 1998).
- 77% are employed elsewhere; two-thirds in full-time positions. The part-timers whose primary jobs are outside academe are not interested in full-time tenurable positions. We labeled them specialists, experts and professionals in *The Invisible Faculty* (Gappa and Leslie, 1993).
- Only 13% are aspiring academics, teaching at several campuses simultaneously.
- 54% have worked at their institution for 4 or more years; 21% for more than 10 years.

These data challenge commonly held myths about part-timers. Part-time faculty constitute a valuable resource to institutions; they are generally well-qualified for the teaching assignments they hold; and they are not a transient, temporary workforce. Part-timers themselves do not cause quality problems. Quality issues stem from their overuse in some departments and from policies and practices governing their employment. These are institutional problems that can be fixed!

Modifications to Tenure

Now let's look at how the current tenure system might be modified to make faculty careers more flexible and attractive for individuals and institutions. As we probe this sensitive terrain, it is important to remember that changes in the academic career will be institution specific, and require faculty involvement and agreement!

Changes in the Probationary Period

As I have mentioned, the probationary period is characterized by high pressure, lack of control over time, ambiguous and changing criteria, mysterious processes, subtle pressures to conform to preferences and prejudices of senior faculty, and work-life conflicts. These sources of discontent on the part of early career faculty surfaced over and over again in structured interviews with new faculty and graduate students across states and sectors of higher education. Various researchers (Rice, 1996; Tierney and Bensimon, 1996; Trower, 1996) all reached the conclusion that new tenure track faculty are largely an unhappy lot.

The pre-tenure review process needs to be revamped (Rice, Chait and Gappa, 1997). Measures that could increase flexibility and reduce inconsistencies and randomness junior faculty ascribe to the tenure process are: making the length of the probationary period more flexible (seven years no longer meets the needs of some probationary faculty), better documentation of teaching and public service, clarity and consistency in tenure criteria and processes, "tenure-by-objectives" performance contracts, regular and timely feedback, continuity in committee membership and systematic mentoring.

Changes in the Time Base and Duration of Tenure

Part-time tenure. Why should tenure be linked to full-time status? Flexibility in the time base of a tenurable position would open up the traditional faculty career to many individuals seeking to balance work-life conflicts or wanting to pursue other careers and interests concurrently with a tenured appointment.

Instant tenure. Some institutions, such as Harvard University, grant tenure at the time of hire and only at the full professor rank. Within the Harvard Graduate School of Education there also must be sufficient funding to support the position, prior authorization for a tenured slot by the senior faculty, and a national search (Gappa, 1996). This policy ensures the tenuring of only senior people in areas of clearly established need.

Limit the tenure guarantee to a fixed period of time. With the elimination of mandatory retirement some are questioning whether or not tenure should be a life-long guarantee and are suggesting that a fixed term with other incentives may be more attractive to faculty.

Promoting Continuing Productivity

Outspoken critics cite tenure as the source of most productivity problems since there is no flexibility to remove unproductive people. What might promote increased productivity?

Redefining what constitutes base salary. Guaranteeing last year's salary does not promote continued productivity and affects institutional flexibility. Heydinger and Simsek (1992) recommend setting the base salary at a threshold level, for example that of a newly hired assistant professor. The remainder of the salary would be earned each year by achieving specific accomplishments based upon agreed upon objectives, and bonuses could be given for very high levels of attainment.

Post-tenure review. Well-conceived post-tenure reviews afford opportunities to enhance faculty development, promote different career emphases, match faculty career goals and institutional priorities, and clarify performance expectations. On the downside, they consume a great deal of time and can convey a punitive image while still not guaranteeing improved performance (Licata and Morreale, 1997).

Assisting faculty with the transition to retirement. There are few incentives to encourage faculty to consider total or phased retirement or other career options without coherent, coordinated incentive programs and retirement options (Rice, Chait and Gappa, 1997). Incentive programs and options can guide faculty toward new roles and careers and smooth what can be very difficult personal transitions.

Alternatives Outside Tenure

More than 50% of faculty members are not in tenurable positions. Twenty-six percent of full-time faculty are outside the tenure system. Whether or not a particular appointment is tenurable is becoming less important to many of these faculty who are disenchanted with the rigidities of tenure and pleased with the flexibility provided by a variety of career paths.

Full-time nontenurable appointments. In professional schools of medicine, health sciences, business, law and education (and increasingly in other disciplines) the use of full-time nontenurable appointments is expanding (Gappa, 1996). These positions are characterized by: well-defined career tracks, appointment and review systems similar to tenure-track, satisfactory or comparable compensation packages, support and status within departments, membership in the professoriate and inclusion within the scope of academic freedom policies, and sufficient job security.

Professional and disciplinary cultures attach legitimacy to these alternative career tracks because clinical and research skills are so highly valued. Full-time nontenurable faculty are treated considerably better than part-timers for the most part. Faculty occupying nontenurable positions as clinicians, professors of practice, distinguished lecturers or research professors are, by and large, satisfied with their status (though there are important differences between junior and senior faculty).

Renewable Multi-Year Appointments. Part- and full-time faculty in nontenurable positions seek some job security. However, these faculty often describe tenure versus non-tenure-track status as a lifestyle choice, a trade-off between the short term risk of being denied tenure and the longer term risk of nonrenewal of multi-year appointments (Gappa 1996). Most full-time nontenurable faculty have alternatives outside academe; most part-timers' primary jobs are outside academe. Many of these faculty see five-year appointments as sufficient job security.

Possible Conversion to Tenure Track Status. The University of Nebraska Medical Center appoints all new faculty to a Health Professions Appointment (HPA). These are contract appointments for up to five years, renewable indefinitely. Faculty may apply for tenure at any time, but they do not need to do so to remain employed (Trower, 1996). If they are denied tenure they resume their HPA appointment and can reapply later. A survey of the faculty showed that they perceive the new HPA system as having a positive

effect on recruitment and as preserving traditional academic values while adopting to the needs of a more diverse faculty (Wigton and Waldman, 1993).

Fair employment for part-timers. Different and mutually exclusive employment systems in the academic profession can lead to conflict rather than collegiality. The more practical alternative is to integrate part-timers into an academic work force characterized by a shared community of interest in building high-quality programs (Gappa and Leslie, 1997). The concept of one faculty should replace the current bifurcated system. To achieve this, institutions must create and support a set of employment conditions that will attract rather than exploit a diverse and highly capable part-time work force.

Three key employment conditions are essential to achieve an attractive work environment for part-timers (Gappa and Leslie, 1993). First, institutions should decide what kinds of faculty are needed to do what kinds of work and select members of the faculty—regardless of full- or part-time status—because they have the qualifications, experience and motivation to provide the education the institution seeks for its students. This approach to faculty staffing would avoid unplanned, out-of-control use of part-timers.

Second, part-timers should be considered regular members of the faculty. Institutional employment policies and practices for part-timers must ensure that they are treated fairly and consistently, given the tools they need to do their jobs, and offered opportunities for career advancement and rewards for excellent performance. Practices such as last minute hiring, semester-by-semester appointments, and breaking continuity of employment to avoid claims of de facto tenure are unnecessary and divisive. A range of employment choices—from tenure or some other measure of job security for some to truly casual and intermittent employment for others—would benefit individuals and the institutions that seek to retain them.

Third, part-timers must be oriented and integrated into their departments and institutions as fully participating members of the faculty. They should be included in faculty development programs and opportunities and consulted on decisions that affect them. Recognition and rewards for all faculty should be based on performance as individuals not on status (Gappa and Leslie 1997).

Conclusion

In conclusion, let's go back to the three key points I made at the opening.

- **There is going to continue to be tenure.**

There are simply too many internal and external pressures—political, economic, professional and personal—to continue with business as usual. We need to focus on reforming the current system to make it better rather than on debating whether or not to abolish tenure.

- **The demographics of the faculty are already changing.**
- **The task before all of us, faculty and administrators within institutions, is to find ways to modify the tenure system and open up faculty career options outside tenure to better meet the needs of faculty and their colleges and universities.**

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