Articulāte

Volume 3 Article 7

1998

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Recommended Citation
Murphy, Andrew (1998) "Tenure in Contemporary Higher Education: Protecting Academic Freedom or Promoting Academic Negligence?," *Articulāte*: Vol. 3 , Article 7.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol3/iss1/7

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Tenure in Contemporary Higher Education: Protecting Academic Freedom or Promoting Academic Negligence?

by Andrew Murphy '98

The politics of academic tenure is an issue which, in the 1990s, is working its way into the conscious of the academic mind. Its significance stems from the fact that the tenure process, and the resulting decisions, affects not only educators, but also students, university communities, and society at large. According to one junior professor, "tenure, at its inception, was meant to protect the academic freedom of university teachers" (Epstien 43). We must ask today, however, in the midst of many tenure-related disputes and discussions in the popular and scholarly media, just how valid tenure is in today's educational system and, more importantly, what positions institutions of higher learning should take on related issues in the future.

Those in favor of the practice claim that

> Academic tenure has been justified historically by the ostensible necessity of protecting "academic freedom." In particular, it was argued to be necessary, purportedly in the interest of the unfettered search for knowledge and truth, to protect the faculty member and, perhaps more importantly, the employing institution from attack by partisan or parochial political, social and religious interests. (Dresch 68)

This goal, in and of itself, is an understandably noble pursuit. Tenure is important because it "secures academic freedom and freedom of speech at the PC university of the '90s," says Richard Berthold, an associate professor at the University of New Mexico, "I say things in class that would get me fired without tenure" (Blair 2). Clearly, there is a need for such protection in academia, a world based on ideas and knowledge. If the tenure process dealt solely with these issues, it would unquestioningly remain a beneficial practice. The tenure process is an intricate and complicated one, however, and one which does much more than merely protect the rights of educators as a whole.

Critics argue that "fundamentally ... [tenure practices] served to concentrate power within institutions in the hands of the [already] tenured faculty, which collectively and virtually independently controlled the award of tenure, not infrequently to ends contradictory to the ostensibly claimed protection of academic freedom in the search for truth" (Dresch 68). This concentration of power allows those select few with tenure to control who has, and does not have, a voice within academic institutions. Such a state would not even present a major problem if the group of tenured individuals were representative of the teaching faculty as a whole—with proportional numbers of women and minority groups—or of the student population. This, however, is not the case, as the majority of those holding tenure are older white males—a group which many refer to as the "old boy network." As Journalism Scholar Larissa Grunig states, "With more women faculty members now than ever before, this situation of women encountering special difficulties in shattering the glass ceiling of academia has major implications" (93). Also of concern is the "lack of women who are tenured or who have attained the rank of full professor" and the "imbalance between female faculty and female students" (Grunig 94).

Thus, a main problem with the current tenure system is its effect on the careers of female educators. According to the *New York Times Magazine,* "In the male-run world of American colleges and universities ... 88 percent of presidents, provosts and chancellors ... 87 percent of full professors, [and] 77 percent of trustees [are men]" (Matthews 47). While such statistics may not cause alarm in some, they are simply not consistent with to the number of women in the work force or in academic institutions. According to *Psychology Today,* "unemployment rates for women with Ph.D.s are two to five times high than for men ... [and] Even if women do get an academic

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job, they are likely to be assigned a lower rank and salary than their male counterparts" (McLeod 14). This assertion is supported by an experiment in which "heads of departments were sent identical résumés with either a male or female name. The 'male name' applicants were judged as meriting the rank of associate professor, while the same résumés from 'female' applicants caused them to be rated as suitable for the lower rank of assistant professor" (McLeod 14). Though such an isolated experiment could be considered unrepresentative of academia as a whole, published evidence suggests otherwise.

According to an article in *Journalism Quarterly:*

> The older men who make [tenure and promotion] choices still don't feel comfortable with women. This is not considered overt discrimination; it is usually very subtle and often unconscious: those doing the choosing would never consider themselves to be discriminating against women. They are simply following their customary way of choosing people. (Grunig 97)

Whatever their intention, however, the result is a severe shortage of women faculty members in tenured positions across the country. "The more prestigious the institution, the fewer women there are," says Anthony DePalma of the *New York Times,* "And the higher the rank, the lower the likelihood that a woman will hold it. Thus, women make up only 11.6 % of full professors nationwide and have made their greatest inroads at community colleges, where the pay is lowest" (DePalma). These trends are especially prevalent in the hard sciences where, according to *Science* magazine:

> The number of women getting Ph.D.s has grown in almost every field of science and engineering: the total is up from 21% in 1979 to 28% in 1989. But not enough of those new Ph.D.s are making it all the way to tenured jobs in universities and colleges. In 1979, according to National Science Foundation figures, women held 5% of all tenured positions. By 1989, the figure had risen—but only to 7% ... Yet because the criteria for tenure are flexible—and often subjective—it is an area where women can be easily discriminated against, sometimes for subtle reasons." (Gibbons 1386)

In addition to establishing a systematic inequality between male and female professors, tenure has also inhibited research in women's studies and feminism because junior faculty women are encouraged to avoid publishing in these areas for fear of being denied tenure. One senior scholar in feminist studies at Stanford "frequently urged younger colleagues to 'play the game' and not publish on women until their careers were assured" (Sternhell 95). Such advice is validated by examples of women being denied tenure because of their focus on women's issues. Stanford's Estele Freedman was told she did not receive tenure because her "teaching and scholarship were too narrowly focused on women" (Sternhell 96-7), and Diana Paul, a Chinese Buddhism scholar, was denied tenure because her book, *Women in Buddhism,* caused the university to claim she belonged in women's studies, not religious studies (Sternhell 97).

Though the cases involving these women are both shocking and disturbing, they are not isolated incidents. Columbia University serves as a first example. Carolyn Heilbrun, "The 66-year-old professor of English, holder of an endowed chair, past president of the Modern Language Association, a leading feminist literary scholar and, not incidentally, the elusive mystery writer known as Amanda Cross" (Matthews 47), left Columbia early out of disgust over the university's treatment of women and feminist issues. "When I spoke up for women's issues, I was made to feel unwelcome in my own department," says Heilbrun, "kept off crucial committees, ridiculed, ignored" (Matthews 47). Some of the problems that led to her departure include the fact that one of her male collegues, whose experience, teaching, and research are comparable to Heilbrun's, "occupies a suite, complete with fax, computer system and two assistants [while] Heilbrun spent her tenure in a standard faculty office, licking her own stamps" (Matthews 72), and that, according to her department chair, in a recent tenure season, out of a "white man doing Shakespeare, [a] white woman doing feminist perspectives on the novel and [a] black man in African-American poetry and gender studies" (72), "All received lifetime employment offers except the feminist—the third time in six years a feminist scholar backed by Heilbrun was kept off Columbia's faculty" (72). Heilbrun's other concerns are that, "Over the last 20 years, two or three men have been tenured for every woman" (72), and that "[The Columbia] tenure committee had not a single woman on it and in

[her] experience confidentiality [in the selection process] means complicity, useful chiefly for protecting old-boy secrets" (72).

Another example comes from the University of Wisconsin. "Ceil M. Pillsbury was disappointed when, in 1989, she was denied tenure at the [University's] business school. The accounting professor had won an award for outstanding teaching, and her research had been published in one of the top journals in her field" (Bongiorno 40). This problem is common in business schools around the country, where "Only 8% of the tenured faculty at Business Week's Top 20 business schools are women, and at several prominent B-schools, including those at Dartmouth College and Washington University, not one woman is tenured" (40). According to a professor at the University of Virginia's School of Business, "The system is controlled by people who have been in the club for many years, mostly white men" (40).

Discouragingly, these problems are not unique to American Universities. In 1993, faculty at Oxford University in the United Kingdom voted "to block the creation of about 15 new posts with the rank of professor—a title that, in Britain, is reserved for only the very top tier of academic staff. The reason: few, if any, women were expected to be among the faculty members to win a promotion" (Aldhous 1231). Neither is Oxford alone in the UK, where "Only 4.9% of ... university professors are female and they are paid, on average, $2,300 a year less than their male colleagues" (1231).

Perhaps the most disturbing part of the tenure controversy is the notion that the cause of such problems is so deeply-rooted in society that it is not even noticed is. In an article in *Ms.* magazine, the husband of a woman denied tenure describes an incident at one unidentified liberal arts institution:

> a string of white males had been voted into tenured professorships just before my wife's candidacy. Most had not written as much, nor inspired the same praise from specialists around the nation. None of their writings had been subjected to the detailed scrutiny—footnote by footnote—given her latest manuscript. Not one of the male candidates had aroused the degree of anger and bitterness that characterized her tenure review." (Reich 32)

He claims that sexism is something present even in "liberal, intellectual, university communit[ies]" because the men on tenure committees have "standards [that] assume that [women have] had the same formative intellectual experience as they, and [have] come to view the modes and purposes of scholarship as they do" (Reich 32).

Such concerns warrant an examination of the process by which a college educator earns tenure. Most schools, according to *U: The National College Magazine,*

> follow traditional guidelines. After five or six years, the tenure candidate goes through a series of evaluations—by the department, a schoolwide committee, a dean or provost, the president and finally the trustees ... When evaluating teachers, most colleges and universities balance the teacher's performance in the classroom with the quality and quantity of research projects and service to the community. Once tenure is granted, a university must demonstrate 'adequate cause'—a tedious and difficult case to prove—to dismiss a professor." (Blair 1)

Accordingly, the tenure criteria of most universities most commonly fall into three broad categories: teaching, research, and service or citizenship. Teaching, the most cut-and-dried of the three, is commonly based on student course evaluations and interviews and departmental faculty observations. Research, an area which is subject to the evaluating body's opinion of subject matter, is judged by the amount and quality of the material written, as well as the reputation of the medium in which the work is published. The third criteria, however, is far more subjective than the others and "is one that always has to be considered but is only in exceptional cases emphasized. It is a judgment, at least in part, of character; it is also a judgment about willingness to conform to the rules, explicit and implicit, that govern institutions of higher learning" (Epstein 43). Such judgments are one of the main reasons tenure decisions often have been accused of unfairness. In the case of female educators, problems arise when their research is trivialized by men who use gender-biased standards of assessment and when their character is evaluated on a personal, rather than professional, basis.

Denison University's Faculty Handbook provide a basis for evaluation of the tenure process. When a professor with a Ph.D. is hired at Denison, he or

she is given the rank of assistant professor, in either a tenure or non-tenure track. Those in the tenure track are evaluated for tenure during their sixth full year of teaching at the University. The Handbook, issued by the Provost, claims, "There is no single mold in which all Denison faculty are cast. We cherish variety. We expect, however, faculty to meet our standards in each of three categories .... In their fulfillment, we look for a pattern of sustained achievement, and for accomplishments of quality" (3). These three categories—consistent with the national norms—are teaching, scholarly activity, and community service.

Evaluation of "Teaching," according to the handbook, includes:

> end-of-course student evaluations and the analysis and interpretation of these evaluations by members of the individual's department ... interviews with majors within the department, letters from students and advisees with whom the faculty member has worked closely, evaluations from recent alumni, and letters from peers who have reviewed course materials and observed the faculty member's teaching performance. (3)

"Scholarly Activity" is judged by looking

> for evidence of a lively and imaginative intellect which is engaged in a continuing, visible, and substantive commitment to advancing knowledge, developing understanding and/or performing in a discipline, field of inquiry, or art form, (3)

as well as evidence that the faculty member creates for students "opportunities to observe the faculty engaged in scholarship, and when appropriate to participate with them" (3). Additionally, "All members of the Denison faculty should periodically give public evidence of scholarly interests and accomplishments ... sharing work and subjecting it to the constructive criticism of associates" (3). The candidate will be judged in these areas by "peers at Denison, members of the President's Advisory Board, and ... by scholars outside of Denison" (4).

Finally, "Community Service," though a factor, is considered secondary to teaching and scholarship. This category consists of:

> a commitment to the basic objectives of liberal education ... expressed by sharing one's field with students ... exploring areas of learning beyond one's own specialty or discipline ... [participating in] curricular development ... University governance ... advising student organizations ... co-curricular activities ... [or] professional organizations. (4)

If the tenure criteria seem complicated, the tenure procedures are even more so. The process—which is presided over by the Provost—first involves the gathering of information regarding the individual being considered. This material, collectively called the dossier, consists of: the individual faculty member's statement, a statement by the individual's department, student evaluations, judgments of colleagues, and examples of the individuals scholarly achievement (6). The members of the "Advisory board,"—the composition of which is not explained—read the dossier and then meet to discuss the candidate. All members have a vote, but the President is allowed to make the final decision. Last, the Board of Trustees makes the formal approval of all tenure approvals.

While there are appeal procedures in effect, the entire process is full of opportunities for personal and gender-based discrimination. The department, for example, could consist only of male tenured professors who would evaluate a female candidate negatively. Similarly, the advisory board could consist of the same, since no specification is made in the handbook of its composition. Lastly, the Provost and/or the President may also color the judgment with personal bias. Simply stated, if any of these individuals does not like a particular candidate—for whatever reason—that individual—despite her or his qualification—will have an almost impossible time securing tenure. Similarly, since the dossier is confidential, a candidate who is less than adequate, but supported by key members of the Advisory board, would have no trouble earning a lifetime employment offer.

Though Denison is just one of hundreds of colleges and universities, its tenure procedure is consistent with the national standard. Disheartening as this may be, however, there are a few cases that offer some hope for change. One such case occurred at Vassar College, where Cynthia Fisher, a biology professor, was denied tenure in 1985. In protest she sued in federal court, and won. The reason behind the ruling was that, "In the 30 years prior to Fisher's review ... no married woman at Vassar had been awarded tenure in the 'hard sciences,' whereas many married men had" (Kaplan 74). Kaplan claims that

"[this] victory ... is not merely symbolic ... [because] Unless overturned by an appeals court, the case is likely to invite similar suits by other women in education who weren't promoted" (74).

Harvard University provides another example. Harvard, one of the nation's most prestigious universities, has a "pathetic number of tenured women—one of the nation's worst records" (Hancock 81). "Nationwide, tenured faculties are on average 23 percent female, but only 11 percent of Harvard's are women ... In addition, at Harvard most women are in junior faculty positions—which means that they will never be considered for tenure" (Hancock 81). Recently, however, a group of female graduates of Radcliffe—the women's college which recently merged with Harvard—is now protesting Harvard's "unimpressive record of hiring tenured women as faculty members" (Rimer). In doing so, they are effectively campaigning to freeze alumni contributions until changes are made.

Dr. Phoebe Leboy of the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine serves as a final example. Today Leboy is "chairwoman of the dental school's department of bio chemistry, a faculty member for a quarter of a century and the only female professor the dental school has ever had" (DePalma). Leboy's accomplishments do help to put a crack the glass ceiling of the academic world. She is, however, alone: "Eight other women are on the 51-member faculty of the school, but none are full professors" (DePalma). Leboy's case illustrates just how crucial it is for universities to change their policies to allow more women to work their way into top positions. Her case also illustrates, however, just how likely it is for successful women to remain alone in their achievements. Such situations are common—in business, politics, and academia—and are the result of men promoting women as token symbols, or else promoting specific women who will ally with their personal agendas and "old boy networks."

This trend becomes all too apparent when one considers Denison University. While President Myers is a woman in a powerful position, her agenda places her own career interests over those of women in the institution. She has strictly aligned herself with University trustees (most of whom are male) and other powerful University officials. She avoids scholarship on women's issues and does not advocate the appointment of talented women to key leadership positions, such as Provost or Dean of Students. Instead of attempting to change the male-dominated academic world—which she is in a perfect position to do—she concentrates on establishing herself as a part of it, working not to end the "old boy networks," but instead to create in them a place for herself and her politics.

Consequently, it is not surprising that Denison—because it has a female president—is no different from many other schools in the country in its low percentages of tenured women faculty members. One needs only to consult the faculty departmental listing in the Denison Directory to confirm this suspicion. Out of 257 total faculty members, 113 are women. Of this number, however, only 23 percent have tenure, compared with 58 percent of the men. When full professorships are isolated, the statistics become even more alarming. There are 59 full male professors and only 8 full female professors, meaning the faculty as a whole consists of 23 percent full male professors and merely 3 percent full female professors. The pie is rounded out with 9 percent associate males, 7 percent associate females, 24 percent male junior faculty, and 34 percent female junior faculty. While some tenured women faculty do exist, they are few and far between. Interestingly, many of these fully-tenured women are also very close with the University's president and other powerful figures. While there is no way to prove—without the help of such individuals and access to confidential salary records and tenure dossiers—that blatant discrepancies still exist today, many faculty still claim "off the record" that they do. Though they request that their names be withheld due to the threat of professional consequences, they state that biased and sexist practices are still in place—in hiring procedures, tenure decisions, promotions, and pay increases.

Unfortunately, Denison is not alone in its conservatism. A 1996 article in the *New York Times* claims that, in academia, men receive "about 30 percent more than women" and that "pay differences have been consistent in the last 15 years" (Honan). This trend is perhaps the most disheartening, because not only is it an issue of women securing positions which they deserve, but also of ensuring that they are compensated adequately and fairly once they get them. "On every rung of the ladder men earn more than women, and the gap has actually widened in the last decade. Male professors earn more to begin with, they

get high annual raises (in both real dollars and percentage points), and they're more likely to be promoted" (Sternhell 98). At Harvard, for instance, "male professors earn $93,600 on average while women of equal rank earn $79,900 on average" (DePalma). Pay discrepancies remain in academia, presumably because the individuals and committees responsible for making tenure decisions frequently are the same individuals and committees responsible for determining salaries and pay increases. Consequently, many sexist trends are found, and will continue to be found, until fundamental changes are made.

Such evidence alone provides a substantial case for the reevaluation of the tenure system. Sexism, however, is not the only of tenure's faults. The current system also provides no means of reprimand for inappropriate behavior. "If a young teacher shows himself irresponsible in his committee assignments, if he misses classes owing to drunkenness, if he seduces his young students, if he shows no regard for the fundamental beliefs of the institution, he could, theoretically, be faulted ... and hence denied tenure. With tenure, it occurs to me to add, the same teacher could today do any of the things mentioned in the previous sentence and probably keep his job" (Epstein 43). This double standard for tenured and non-tenured professors is simply unacceptable. Demonstration of competence and quality at one point in a professor's career does not guarantee that these behaviors will continue through retirement. In addition, tenure inhibits young educators from securing stable jobs. Even professors who are not productive can retain their distinguished positions and handsome salaries, while talented younger faculty remain out in the cold. The redefinition of tenure is needed because, as one Berkeley administrator put it, "People can mentally retire at a very early age because tenure protects them" (Barinaga 1236).

Such examples only add to the case against tenure as an academic institution. Changes need to be made which will hold educators accountable for their actions. Academia needs to create a system in which a professor who does not perform according to expectation is fired, and in which a candidate qualified for a position is hired, regardless of his or her personal characteristics or political viewpoints. Education is serious business and those involved need to treat it as such. Unfortunately, changes such as periodic contract reviews and performance-based salary determination will simply not occur as long as tenure continues to protect the actions, or lack thereof, of the power-wielders in academia. As one tenured Denison professor put it, "I could fornicate with barnyard animals in the middle of the academic quad and there would be nothing the University could do about it." Such arrogance, and the biased politics which tenure breeds, does not protect "academic freedom." Instead, it protects the ability of power-hungry individuals to destroy the principles on which higher education is based.

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