

## **Tenure: Basic Facts**

### **Tenure is a system for ensuring excellence**

Tenure-track faculty are hired from among a national or even international pool of applicants. It is common for there to be hundreds of applicants for every position. Nevertheless, the tenure process itself has been called “the world’s longest job interview.” Before receiving tenure, a faculty member spends years in a probationary period—usually at least three years for community colleges and seven at four-year institutions. During this time, the faculty member’s contribution to the mission of the institution is regularly and rigorously assessed. Every detail of his or her teaching, research, and service to the school, as well as any commercialization activities, are reviewed every year during this time. In addition, most four-year institutions require a comprehensive, in-depth evaluation of the faculty member’s progress at around the third year. Faculty members whose work is subpar, too slow, or a poor fit for the institution are often dismissed at that point. And the dismissal process for faculty at any time in the probationary period is usually short and uncomplicated, so these pre-tenure faculty are very much on trial and under significant pressure to perform.

The process of granting tenure itself takes about a year, and requires candidates to thoroughly document their excellence. Tenure is only granted to those who have impressed their peers, administrators, and prominent external reviewers that they will continue to excel even after the pressures of the probationary period are lifted. Successful tenure applications require evidence of effective teaching in the kinds of classes that the faculty member was hired to teach.

Going “up for tenure” is a high-stakes process for a faculty member, because it is an up-or-out system. Probationary faculty who are denied tenure are out of a job, and have a much lower chance of subsequently being employed in higher education. Conversely, having tenure is an incentive to stay at an institution. In addition to keeping talent from being as frequently “poached,” this means that many faculty have been at a university long enough to provide the institutional memory that can help other faculty and even the administration work efficiently and productively. The same cannot be said of most senior administrators: provosts on average stay in the same job just under five years, and university presidents fewer than nine.

### **Tenure is not a job for life**

Several conditions must usually be met for a tenured faculty member to be dismissed. Faculty can be fired for incompetence or misconduct or if an institution discontinues their program or is in a financial emergency. The dismissal process typically requires several steps to make sure that due process is observed. But it is not more difficult than dismissing Ohio’s classified state employees, who also make up a significant number of the staff members at the state’s public institutions of higher education. In addition, most of Ohio’s public institutions of higher education have some system of formal post-tenure review, and every institution evaluates all tenured faculty each year to identify merit or shortcomings.

### **Tenure can reduce institutional costs**

Tenure reduces personnel costs to Ohio public institutions in two ways. First, the relative job security that comes with tenure throughout American higher education helps offset the higher wages that talented and highly-educated individuals could expect to demand in the private sector. Although hard

data is difficult to come by, many professors in the highest-paid departments and colleges (e.g., Business Administration or Marketing) tell stories of walking away from more lucrative positions in the business world. They do so because of a sense of educational mission, but also because even a lower-paying tenured post provides their families with greater economic stability. Geneticists who currently produce cutting-edge research in university settings would have to seriously reconsider the higher salaries of the private biotech industry if they did not have the insurance of tenure.

Second, weakening tenure locally results in the loss of high-profile faculty to other states and also higher costs for retaining those that stay. Just the perception that Wisconsin was attempting this experiment in 2015–16 forced U.W.-Madison to commit \$23.6 million in salary and research costs to keep highly productive faculty (and the outside research funding that came with them). Wisconsin's counter-offers to faculty offered positions elsewhere in 2016 alone resulted in 111 faculty who had threatened to leave staying at the university for higher compensation, but failed to persuade another twenty-nine.

### **Tenure serves the public good by freeing research from short-term profits and political trends**

Most basic research in the United States happens at institutions of higher education. One of the reasons is that, unlike private companies, universities have tenured faculty. They can pursue long-term projects that do not pay off quickly. They can also afford to take risks with no guarantee of success, laying the groundwork for better understanding in their own or others' later research. In addition, research programs granting doctoral degrees require long-term appointments in specialized fields to allow for the five or more years that a student needs in a stable lab. This is the critical first pipeline for progress in most STEM fields. Absent tenure, universities strapped for cash might be tempted or even forced to behave more like private companies—which cannot afford to investigate, for example, the biochemical mechanisms of antibiotic resistance or the physics that could lead to completely new kinds of engines. Both quality of life and economic development cannot improve unless some of society's best minds work on the fundamental problems in their fields. In addition, the labs at Ohio's universities are a part of graduate and advanced undergraduate education, combining research with the best hands-on pedagogy for our students.

Tenure was first adopted, though, as a safeguard against short-term political thinking. Unpopular opinions or theories sometimes turn out to be right, and even crucial to solving social or technical problems. Good teaching requires that students understand the consensus of experts in the field and have the opportunity to engage with emerging knowledge, even if it is controversial. This is the heart of academic freedom. The classic outline of this principle is the 1940 AAUP "Statement on Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure." Academic freedom is different from the First Amendment. It specifically protects individual faculty from being punished by loss of employment for pursuing legitimate forms of scholarship or for responsibly teaching the content of their academic field—even when university administrators or people outside the university disapprove. It also empowers universities to judge what kind of curriculum will best prepare students for their own futures and the future needs of their communities.