



IMPROVING THE TENURE PROCESS

Inside and outside the walls of higher education, the luster of tenure has diminished. What should its future be? As of 2023, only 23% of faculty members held full-time tenured positions. The public increasingly perceives that tenure has devolved from its original noble purpose of safeguarding academic freedom to become a mere promise of job security, even for incompetent or unproductive professors. This frustration is not unfounded. The rising cost of obtaining a college degree has outpaced wage growth, while a majority of recent college graduates find themselves underemployed because their degrees have not prepared them for success in the workplace. These trends, combined with a lack of meaningful reforms from within the academy, have led policymakers in several states to enact policies that limit or eliminate tenure at public universities.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) recognizes the need for changes to the tenure system, but we still believe it can play a role in maintaining faculty excellence. Rather than eliminating tenure altogether, a better path forward is substantive reform. By improving the tenure process internally, colleges and universities can begin to regain the public's confidence and safeguard their autonomy from political intrusion. With this in mind, we recommend the following changes:

- **Adopt regular, robust, and public post-tenure review.**
- **Publicly define the policies and procedures used to evaluate candidates for tenure.**
- **Share the results of tenure votes by committees and leadership.**
- **Ensure tenure is a reward for excellence rather than an entitlement.**

Post-tenure review is a long-overdue, commonsense reform. After a predetermined amount of time (preferably no more than five years), tenured professors should undergo a rigorous evaluation that includes reviews by committees of their department, outside evaluators, and the institution's administration. Universities must adopt clear, strict guidelines to ensure that this review cannot be used capriciously to weaken the academic freedom of tenured faculty. Instead, post-tenure review must aim to ensure accountability and drive professional development. If tenured faculty have failed to meet established benchmarks, they should begin a formal process with clear, timely goals for improvement. While this process must provide robust due process pathways for faculty to defend their records, it must also include a legitimate possibility of revoking tenure if performance does not meet university standards after a remedial period. In other words, the academy must come closer to the practices of other sectors of the economy. In this spirit, institutions must set clear guidelines for declaring financial exigency. Too often, this process is used as a blunt instrument to bypass academic protections without sufficient oversight. Colleges and universities should establish transparent financial reporting standards that must be met before a state of exigency can be declared.

PROMOTING ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND EXCELLENCE

The process of obtaining tenure must be as transparent as possible. By establishing clear, straightforward, and publicly available criteria for tenure-track positions, institutions can reduce the likelihood that the tenure process will be hijacked by those who would turn it into an ideological litmus test. Boards should develop institution-wide policies informed by their unique needs and missions while allowing academic deans to define the appropriate balance among teaching, research, and service in evaluating a professor's work. Tenure's deterioration has been driven in part by a culture within higher education that improperly prioritizes celebrity, networking, and public image. Faculty should be assessed, moreover, according to the responsibilities that best match their roles and strengths rather than a rigid, one-size-fits-all metric.

To promote accountability among those involved in awarding tenure, decisions at each step of the process should be transparent. While these results should be available to the university community, the tabulation of votes taken at each step of the tenure process should also be presented to the governing board before final approval. Split votes can be a sign that particular scrutiny is needed. Although confidential deliberation is a necessary part of the tenure process, in rare cases where the final tenure recommendation is rejected, this decision should be explained publicly to ensure that it was based on published criteria rather than caprice. If it becomes clear that a particular body is compromising the integrity of the process, the board should have the information needed to act accordingly and apply sanctions for negligence and prejudice. To strengthen public accountability, universities should aggregate information about tenure decisions and publish an annual report that provides data on success rates, common reasons for denial, as well as a breakdown of the percentage of tenured and tenure-track faculty by department.

Finally, tenure should be viewed as a privilege awarded only to those exceptional faculty members who have earned it, rather than a reward based on time of service. Faculty who fail to prepare students for success should not receive tenure. Teacher quality can be measured, and it is the business of each institution's academic administration to use clear, rigorous standards, including outside evaluation for all tenure candidates, regardless of their specializations. Research-focused faculty have a history of well-reviewed publications and grant work; teaching-focused faculty should be able to demonstrate pedagogical innovations, student mentorship, and curriculum development; while service-focused faculty should be evaluated by their measurable contributions to the institution's mission, such as gaining patents, leading community and industry partnerships, or superlative administrative leadership. Retaining exceptional faculty, including teaching faculty, must be part of an institution's mission to drive student success. Due consideration should be given to five- and ten-year renewable contracts in situations where lifetime appointments may not be appropriate.

By adopting these reforms, colleges and universities can honor the trust vested in them by students, philanthropists, and taxpayers. A modernized tenure system—one that values diverse faculty contributions and demands ongoing excellence—is a necessary safeguard against the erosion of the American higher education system.