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Parents: Your Children Need Professors With Tenure

Mark Shaver for The Chronicle

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By Cary Nelson

If you follow the news these days, you know that tenure is getting a bad rap. Fox News in particular will tell you that tenure shields radicals who are trying to indoctrinate your children to overthrow the government. In truth, it's hard to find any faculty member sending that message. No matter. It's a good scare tactic. But even the responsible press prefers editorials and op-ed essays claiming that tenure protects deadwood, preserves an aging

professoriate, and costs too much money. Although each of those claims can be proved wrong, they have gained traction anyway.

The most recent federal statistics on the age of the faculty were released in 2004. They tell us that, at four-year colleges, the percentage of full-time faculty members aged 55 or older was 28 percent. How many were 65 or older? Only 7 percent. It doesn't appear that most faculty members are great-grandparents.

As for costs, universities typically spend only one-third of their budgets on faculty salaries. Despite more than 10 years of education after high school, most people standing in front of a college classroom earn less than \$60,000 a year, considering that contingent faculty members, who are not eligible for tenure, make up two-thirds of the faculty work force. Most earn well less than \$35,000. And most graduate students paid as teachers earn less than \$20,000 a year.

It's not faculty salaries that have grown so much over the years; it's the increasing number of administrators and their salaries—along with unnecessary building—that is breaking the higher-education bank. That's where your tuition money goes. Why? Because administrators set one another's salaries and pad their staffs.

As for deadwood? Well, the job market for faculty members has been extraordinarily competitive for 40 years. Colleges everywhere have been able to hire outstanding faculty members, people who work hard and stay current in their fields because they love what they do. The deadwood retired or died years ago.

"So what?" you may say. The butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker don't have tenure. Your wife, husband, partner, and next-door neighbor don't have tenure. Why should faculty members have job security after seven years? The short answer is that tenure guarantees the quality and integrity of higher education—by securing faculty members' intellectual independence. Your children need tenured college professors.

In truth, many Americans deserve better job security than they have. But the people responsible for teaching your children have a special need to be protected from capricious dismissal. If your children are going to be taught to think rigorously and creatively—which is their best route to success—they need to be taught by teachers who can be rigorous, creative, and courageous as well. Tenure doesn't guarantee that college teachers will be courageous. But it protects those who are.

Professors without tenure are nothing more than at-will employees. They can be fired tomorrow or whenever their contracts expire. One complaint from a student, parent, or politician is all it may take. What if a professor offends a parent or preacher by teaching evolution? What if a professor expresses sympathy for unpopular religious beliefs? What if a professor admits that he or she supports gay rights? What if a professor asks students whether the war in Iraq was in the national interest? Worst of all, what if a professor asks students whether the college really needs that fancy new administration building? Administrators who prefer to avoid controversy just won't send that professor a new contract.

A college must be a place where all views can be aired. A college professor must be able to voice controversial views and challenge his or her students to question their assumptions and, at the very least, learn to define and defend them more effectively. Too many faculty members without tenure do not want to take that risk. Tenure doesn't protect bad professors, but it does mean that complaints have to be considered at a formal hearing.

Students and faculty members alike must be free to question commonplace beliefs, challenge their college administrations, and criticize politicians without fear of reprisal. Don't count on this essential principle of academic freedom's being exercised if your children's teachers aren't eligible for tenure. Your children may never again work in a place where free debate is encouraged. But the country as a whole will be better off if they've had the experience in their college years.

Tenure produces many other practical benefits. Tenure-track and tenured professors are able to work with one another to plan the college curriculum and deliver the best possible education. They also have much more reason to feel strong institutional loyalty and to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their jobs. Faculty members not eligible for tenure are often not even invited to faculty meetings, and thus are deprived of a way to share their experiences, learn from their colleagues, and help one another to be better teachers.

The accumulated decrease over two generations in the percentage of faculty members with tenured jobs means that as more faculty members come and go, your children may find it more difficult to locate them when they need letters of recommendation. Many part-time instructors who are ineligible for tenure race from campus to campus to cobble together the equivalent of a full-time job. They have only half as much time to spend preparing their classes or advising their students. The decline of full-time tenured positions goes hand in

hand with a decline in the quality of education. Remember: Poor teaching conditions produce poor learning conditions. Your children pay the price.

Tenure serves your personal interest and the national interest at the same time. Your tuition dollars are an investment. If you want to increase the chances that your investment will pay off, if you want to get the best value for your money, then make certain that the college your family chooses grants tenure to its professors. The gradual erosion of tenure has meant that thousands of faculty members are vulnerable to administrative, political, or religious pique and whim. Attacks in the press may make things still worse.

Pique and whim should not be the governing principles of campus life. In far too many countries, people cannot expect their children's college instructors to have either academic freedom or job security. Education suffers as a result. Americans should expect better. Your children need college teachers with tenure.

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