Tenure track or shooting gallery?

The shocking case last February, when a junior academic denied tenure by her faculty at the University of Alabama went on a murderous shooting rampage at a departmental meeting, can be dismissed as the act of a lunatic. However, it highlights the pressures confronted daily by young scientists seeking to establish their careers. Without dwelling on the details of the case, which are anyway a judicial matter, we should ask whether promotion to a permanent position is appropriate in today's universities, and if not, what should replace it?

Tenure was originally created to enshrine the academic independence of professors. Having proven capable of scholarship and the ability to teach, as judged by peers, a professor would be appointed for life, or at least up to the age of statutory retirement. Once permanently tenured, professors are theoretically immune to political, commercial or any other sort of pressure influencing the subject matter of their research, the objectivity of any conclusions they might draw from it, or the manner in which they pass on knowledge to students and other associates. One can cite dozens of examples of authoritarian regimes in which the absence of this guarantee led directly to malign interference with academic freedom. For example, permanent tenure was abolished in Iranian universities in 2007; professors are now rehired annually, with the decision based on religious rather than academic criteria, and requiring an additional ratification, case-by-case, by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security.

Conversely, one can easily see how the tenure system itself can be, and has been, used to ensure compliance with state policy. If conforming to a preordained set of ideological guidelines is the condition for getting tenure in the first place, even the most junior of researchers will feel compelled to toe the line. In the former Soviet Union and its satellites, public obeisance to Marxist-Leninist principles was a prerequisite for preferment in the universities. In more extreme times

and places, academic rebellion against the prevailing orthodoxy has resulted not only in a denial of tenure but in incarceration, torture and execution. In other words, tenure is only the flimsiest defence against egregious political interference with science and scholarship, and can only work as such in a society that is governed by democratic norms and the rule of law.

Even in democratic societies, the conditions and mechanisms for obtaining permanent tenure, where it still exists, often represent a less dramatic but still pernicious interference with academic freedom, potentially steering creative scientists into comparatively mundane spheres of scholarship and/or sycophancy towards senior mentors. Publications depend on grants, grants depend on publications, and tenure depends on both. There is thus a strong bias against risky projects yielding results only in the longer term, even if it actually takes a long time to achieve tenure. Getting published in the top journals can be a matter of fashion as much as of substance, but fashion, by definition, is yesterday's originality. Virtually all funding agencies routinely ask applicants and reviewers about the applicability and societal impact of research proposals, with the implied value judgement that research that leads somewhere—for example, to medical, agricultural or environmental innovations—is inherently superior to research that merely expands knowledge of the universe. To obtain tenure, one needs to be successful in science, but success often requires compromise. And the internal process for deciding tenure in most universities is far from transparent; referral to an independent panel of international experts is the exception rather than the rule.

The Iranian model of rolling annual tenure is clearly worse in that, independently of the non-academic criteria applied in that particular jurisdiction, success has to be judged on a very short-term basis. This biases further the nature of research that can be undertaken. For most countries where permanent tenure has been abolished, it has been

replaced by a variant of five-year rolling tenure, which provides a more acceptable time-scale for reaching academic judgements but still disfavours genuinely long-term projects with uncertain outcomes. Moreover, as most elite institutions continue to measure productivity largely by the traditional yardstick of research output, academics in such universities still have little incentive to develop innovative or effective teaching.

The main argument against the traditional tenure system is that, because it puts all weight on a single judgement at a relatively early career stage, it removes most of the incentive to remain productive thereafter. It also seems inherently unfair that, whereas the position of a senior manager in private industry is at the mercy of the shareholders or the whim of a CEO, a university professor can just coast effortlessly on to retirement.

Nevertheless, as someone who speaks from the luxury of having obtained tenure twice, in different countries, I remain unconvinced by such arguments. The incentives to perform excellent research and teaching do not come solely from the dream of obtaining a permanent position. Anyone who is committed to science does it mainly for love. Moreover, there are ample other ways of encouraging academics to remain active and effective, such as productivity-based salary enhancements, and promotion to positions bringing greater responsibility and opportunity. Disillusionment and loss of productivity usually come about not as a result of having a cushy position for life, but because of external circumstances, such as a short-term grants famine engendered by an economic crisis, or a string of PhD students with insoluble personality problems. In my experience, it is colleagues who are employed on the rolling tenure system who are least likely to shine, being focused on doing the bare minimum required to retain their job, with no long-term rewards in view.

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