

Getting Tenure In A Down Economy

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ABSTRACT

Academic tenure is now under attack. A down economy has placed greater pressure on institutions making tenure more difficult to obtain. Nineteen tips for gaining tenure in a down economy are presented along with several justifications for tenure and why tenure is important for the preservation of the academy and the freedom to research and teach.

Keywords: Tenure; Economic Downturn; Job Market; Economy; Academic Freedom; University Politics

INTRODUCTION

For anyone seeking an academic position or looking at the prospect of applying for tenure anytime soon, the current job market is absolutely daunting. The current job seeker faces the worst economy and the worst job market since the Great Depression. Conversely, the faculty member who is thinking of applying for tenure is looking at the possibility of entering that job market should she not succeed in obtaining tenure. While the Bureau of Labor Statistics may be reporting joblessness at 9.5 percent, the actual figure is much closer to 20 percent when the people who have lost their unemployment benefits are included in the calculation, and the people who have completely given-up looking for work are included in the report. If the underemployed are included (those working part-time, but would like to be working full-time), the unemployment/underemployment rate is well over 20 percent (Maidment, 2009).

This economy has certainly spilled over into the academic job market with historically fewer positions available to job seekers, and the jobs that are available are offering fewer perks and lower salaries than was the case just a few years ago, just like in the rest of the economy.

As a result, there are fewer tenure-track positions being offered. It is the simple application of the law of supply and demand. There are more people looking for jobs than there are jobs, but there are still tenure-track jobs available and people are still going up for tenure.

WHY DO WE HAVE TENURE?

Many people recognized the importance of allowing scholars to think, research, and publish freely without fear of reprisal, including Thomas Jefferson when he attempted to attract the eminent scholar, Nathaniel Bowditch, to the University of Virginia with tenure for life (Brubaker & Rudy, 1976). The issue started to come to a head in the early twentieth century when the influence of private donors was starting to be keenly felt in higher education. These donors believed that since they were financially supporting institutions of higher education, those institutions should not be expressing or promoting views that they found to be at odds with their interests.

Alton B. Parker, presidential candidate on the Democratic ticket in 1904, famously put this position well (Parker, 1902):

Therefore, when in opposition to the wishes or without the consent of the supporters of the institution, any of the faculty persists in a course that must tend to impress upon the tender minds of the young under his charge theories deemed to be false by the foundation whose servant he is, or which, if not strictly false to it, are deemed so by a vast majority of the most intelligent minds of the age, it seems to me that he has abused his privilege of expression of opinion to such an extent as to justify the governing board in terminating his engagement.

Leading university presidents, such as the University of Chicago's William Rainey Harper, most emphatically took another view (Ryan, 1939):

No donor has any right before God or man to interfere with the teaching officers appointed to give instruction in a university!

The president of Columbia University, Nicholas Murray Butler, openly proclaimed that Columbia University had turned down over \$9,000,000 during the 30 years he had been president because strings were attached to the money (Elliot, 1937).

In 1940, the American Association of University Professors and the Association of American Colleges issued the "Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure" that stated tenure helped to maintain academic freedom. It also stated that it made the profession of college teaching attractive to able persons and set up guidelines for achieving tenure that are generally followed by most institutions of higher education today.

TENURE IS UNDER ATTACK

There are proportionately fewer tenured and tenure track positions available today than in the 1970's. "Since the 1970's, the proportion of tenured and tenure-track faculty members in the American professoriate has dwindled from about 57 percent to about 35 percent, while the proportion of full- and part-timers working off the tenure track has grown from about 43 percent to 65 percent. Moreover, the proportion of professors in line for tenure has shrunk faster than the proportion of those who already enjoy tenure" (Gravois, J. 2006). This was before the current economic recession.

Tenure is also under attack from other sources as well. Business and industry continues to look upon tenure as something it does not understand nor would tolerate (Sowell, 1998). Free market capitalists attack tenure's flaws, which do exist, as protecting incompetent professors, wasting money on obsolete programs, inefficiently allocating resources, and preventing younger instructors with new ideas from advancing in the profession (Reiland, 1996).

WHY SEEK TENURE?

Tenure remains an important facet of higher education in the United States. It continues to exist and will continue to exist for the foreseeable future. The need to protect scholars from the intrusion so vehemently opposed by William Rainey Harper still exists (McDaniel, 1997), and Thomas Jefferson supported the establishment of tenure for scholars when creating the University of Virginia.

The infamous internal politics of the academy is also a reason to seek tenure (Woodrow Wilson is reported to have said, "I learned my politics from the faculty at Princeton and then went to Washington to practice with the armatures."). Faculty members who take an unpopular stance inside the organization may find themselves suddenly having to seek alternative employment. The concept of joint governance would have difficulty existing without the institution of tenure. In a sense, tenure is necessary to protect one's self from one's colleagues.

TIPS FOR SEEKING TENURE

So the question becomes, "Once one has been successful in obtaining a tenure track position, how do you achieve tenure?" Here are tips for faculty seeking tenure:

1. CYA (Cover Your A**) - As with everything else in life you need to cover your a**, but even more carefully now. Make certain you keep emails, letters and memos so that it does not become a "he said vs. she said."
2. CIF (Call in All Favors) - For years you have been helping out the VIP's with little or no thanks or recognition. Now is the time to call in the chips and get formal letters of support.

3. WOP (Working on Portfolio) - Begin working on the portfolio 9-12 months before the due date. When people want you to VOLUNTEER for something, just say, “WOP, that is my priority.” The kitchen island is a great place to work on this project, except for the fact that you need a table for sorting materials that can’t be moved.
4. SUC (Suck Up to Committee) - Subtly begin to suck up to the tenure committee so that they will be responsive to approving you for tenure.
5. MAD (Make a Deal) - If someone asks for a FAVOR, get a favor in return to help you get tenure. If necessary, get the deal in writing.
6. PPP (Publish, Publicize, Present) - Without marketing yourself, publishing articles of note and making presentations you are dead meat. Devote several years to this process.
7. DME (Don’t Make Enemies) - You never know the true relationship between faculty members. It is best not to go to battle with anyone to avoid negative vibes on the committee.
8. AFV (Abstain from Voting) - When it comes to voting no confidence for your department head or some other critical issue, abstain from voting. People expect you to abstain since getting tenure is more important than being right at this time.
9. DSD (Don’t Socialize in the Department) -When you socialize in the department, you are in one camp or another. You need to keep off the battlefield when going for tenure, so love your family even more and find friends outside the fortress.
10. BO (Be Optimistic) - Be as optimistic as possible. Sometimes you have to wait for the second go-around since some committee members did not get through on the first go-around and they want you to have the same experience they had.
11. CYCC (Choose your Committee Carefully) - If you have a choice of committees on which to serve, go for the most prestigious committees with the least amount of meetings.
12. GYT (Grit Your Teeth) - When times get tough and you know that your decision could affect your tenure, go with “eating crow” and move along professionally.
13. VAH (Vent at Home) - Prepare your family to have you vent at home instead of at work. This will help you to get tenure. However, meet with the family and agree upon how long you can vent and which methods can be used.
14. PYP (Publish Your Portfolio) - We are not saying this literally. What we mean is that the graphics, organization, neatness, and thoroughness should be on a publishing level. Anything that appears on your resume should have a validation item in your portfolio. Don’t get caught with a Swiss Cheese Portfolio.
15. BS (Be Selective) - When developing your portfolio, don’t go for quantity, but quality. One of our professors brought in her six big binders in a red wagon and was denied promotion.
16. KOT (Keep on Target) - When putting your case together for tenure or promotion, look at what the university is requiring to get them and be sure to do those things. For example, if they want publications, be sure you have them.
17. PIW (Put it in Writing) - When people complement you on a program, paper, class or a presentation, ask them to put it in writing. What they said to you orally means nothing to the tenure committee. They don’t want to hear how much your students love you; they need to see it in writing. The same goes for staff and faculty who praise your work. Tell them “SEND ME AN EMAIL!”
18. LYF (Love Your Family) - It really does not matter if you get tenure or promotion; nothing is more important than family. When you have a loving family, and the committee does not, you are sometimes looked at as a threat. If you get too tense and uptight, they sense this and dig their heels in even more.
19. PB (Party Big) - Finally, when you do achieve tenure or promotion, PARTY BIG! Go out and have a good time! You’ve earned it! You deserve it! Now enjoy it!

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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