

THE CHRONICLE  
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# Rethinking Tenure

Abolish, strengthen,  
or replace it?



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Some colleges are experimenting with alternatives to tenure, finding ways to offer job security and a governance role to those outside the system. Others are trying to make tenure expectations clearer and fairer. Alexander C. Kafka reports.

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### About This Project

Tenure as an institution has been shrinking for years. Today, tenured and tenure-track faculty members make up **less than 30 percent** of the nation's professoriate.

In this collection of *Chronicle* articles, anchored by newly reported analysis, you'll hear from academics who want to strengthen tenure, recreate it, abolish it, or experiment with something new in its place. Read on to learn how tenure's place in the academy is changing.

Cover illustration by Golden Cosmos for *The Chronicle*

SECTION 1



# New Tenure Models for Changing Times

This collection will help you form some conclusions. Meanwhile, as the percentage of tenured professors continues its likely decline, some colleges are increasingly rewarding talented teaching as well as research, and trying to improve the professional lives of the nontenured, too.

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### A SCHOLAR'S TRUE IMPACT

"The biggest problem with tenure as it currently exists is that there's not enough of it to go around," writes William Deresiewicz, an author and critic who taught literature and writing at Yale. "The immoral adjunctification of academic labor is rotting the profession from within." His solution: Unionize. Preferably, "one enormous national union, a million-plus strong, covering all 4,000 colleges."

Hans-Joerg Tiede, director of research at the American Association of University Professors, says that the 1940 AAUP vision for tenure was that all full-time faculty members would be eligible for it. But how are junior faculty supposed to earn it when they try to balance their heavy teaching and service loads with placing articles in influential journals and writing a monograph?

They aren't. The research expectations piled on tenure processes over the decades are not inherent to the concept, he says, and colleges should reset and reimagine tenure to better reward teaching and other kinds of academic commitment.

An increasing number of colleges have decided that teaching should be valued as much as research. In 2021 Worcester Polytechnic Institute established new options for its 128 teaching faculty members to earn tenure or other types of long-range contracts, and extended guarantees of academic freedom and participation in faculty governance.

Other institutions are having active conversations about giving greater weight to community-based research, not as a substitute for more-traditional peer-reviewed publishing but in conjunction with it. At the University of British Columbia's

Okanagan Campus, says Bryce Traister, dean of the faculty of creative and critical studies, an ethnographic report on antiracism at the university was well received and, alongside a sufficient number of high-quality peer-reviewed journal articles, it helped the author's successful tenure bid.

Where, after all, is a scholar's real impact? The cost of research and overhead behind a single article in a prestigious business journal is \$400,000, a figure that reflects salary, benefits, sabbaticals, and administrative support, according to a Wharton School study. Usha C.V. Haley, a professor of international business and management at Wichita State University, discusses the study in a forthcoming book, *Impact and the Management Researcher*. That journal article, so costly to produce, may well be arcane, rarely cited, and possibly unread even by the scholars who do cite it.

The journal impact factor is a measurement created to help librarians make choices about publication purchases, Haley says. It indicates nothing about research impact or the number of citations for a specific article, yet tenure committees are obsessed with it. Not only is that American model irrational, says Haley, but, worse

still, the rest of the world is imitating it.

The pandemic has highlighted inequities in the tenure process, exacerbating family responsibilities for female faculty members especially. Extending the ten-ure clock is often mentioned as a partial remedy, but it's a problematic one, says the AAUP's Tiede, because it delays the end of junior professors' probationary period and their promotions, resulting in net losses to cumulative lifetime income. Instead, he suggests a more straightforward, immediate solution: Faculty-governance bodies could lower the bar. Instead of requiring three journal articles as part of the tenure portfolio, for instance, ask for two.

Alternatively, institutions can acknowledge lost time and income and directly compensate for it, as did the University of Denver. It granted "retroactive pay raises and retirement-fund contributions to ensure faculty don't suffer lifelong financial consequences for the delay in achieving their career milestones."

Denver's percentage of tenured faculty, at more than half, is higher than average, but the university is also trying to improve conditions for its non-tenure-track teaching and professional faculty members. A policy shift made six years ago converted 222 full-time lecturer positions to longer

contract positions (up to seven years) with greater employment stability, a defined role in faculty governance, and a clear pathway to promotion.

At Denver, non-tenure-track faculty have, if anything, played an outsize role in the Faculty Senate, says Kate Willink, vice provost for faculty affairs. The next step is to standardize promotion opportunities for the nontenured in more than 20 departments across 11 schools, finding the right balance between fairness and programs' autonomy.

Business, law, pharmacy, and other professional programs have long relied on professors of practice, who work outside the tenure system. They have fresh real-world experience, aren't necessarily trying to build a long-term academic career, and want to help nurture the next generation in their field. The Tobin College of Business at St. John's University, in New York, for example, is actively hiring more such professors — although there is currently a cap that allows a maximum of 10 percent of Tobin's 95 full-time faculty members to be in that category, says Norean Sharpe, the college's dean.