

BMI Teaching Trends Newsletter – March 2022

Teaching Matters

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Is Tenure Worth Fighting For?

Declining faculty tenure lines and the recurring threats to tenured faculty are not unique to Wayne State. [Nationally, the number of tenured faculty](#) has declined from 56.2% to 45.1% over the past 25 years. These declines are driven in part by a reduction in full-time faculty positions: nearly 80% of faculty were full-time in the early 1970s with the current number closer to 55%. Tenured (and tenure-track) positions are represented by a shrinking number of faculty positions in the US under the direction of current university presidents, provosts, and governance boards. Each time a tenured professor retires, the position is often filled with non-tenure track, part-time instructors. This is a process referred to as [adjunctification](#), defined as the trend for institutions of higher learning to hire adjuncts to teach courses at lower compensation rates, without job security or benefits. In part, the rise of this practice can be blamed on the rising demand for ala carte higher education. Part-time, nontraditional students demand individual courses for career advancement or certification vs. a full, four-year formal degree. Competition from popular online programs such as [Coursera](#) that offer single course offerings or a packaged bundle compete for tuition dollars with traditional institutions. A band-aid solution for universities has been adjunctification which allows cheaper course offerings. Of course, the sacrifice is a loss of the critical mass that full-time faculty need for a fruitful collaborative environment. For adjunct faculty, there is no permanence because if enrollment in their course offerings is inadequate then they do not receive a teaching contract.

In 1940, following a series of joint conferences that were initiated in 1934, the American Association of University Professors and of the Association of American Colleges established a [Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#) invoking the need to protect teachers as “citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution.” The statement defined the limits of the speech that is protected by warning against the introduction of “controversial matter” into the classroom and reminding its beneficiaries that “the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances.” Since development of this statement, the [justification for tenure](#) has resulted in the conflation of the intellectual or civic roles of faculty members on the one hand and their desire for secure employment on the other. For most tenured faculty with no inclination towards making controversial statements in a public forum, the role of tenure has been a mechanism for job security particularly when they are not members of an

effective bargaining unit. At one time in history, the professoriate relied on a degree of social prestige as a community of scholars for protection from external threats. Currently, the status of faculty at institutions of higher learning is more in line with other service employees such as elementary- and secondary-school teachers. The American public, particularly those who are right of center in their political views, express little trust in the universities making the tenure system an easy target motivating a reconsideration of the entire system by university leadership. In Britain the academics benefit from just-cause protections from termination but it comes at the cost of the autonomy afforded by academic freedom. External bureaucracies in that country are in place to provide rigid oversight.

American faculty have been ceding power for decades due to an increasingly corporate management style of universities. Therefore, faculty are increasingly looking to the National Labor Relations Board for protections, essentially relinquishing efforts to maintain shared university governance. However, consider an argument for tenure from the perspective of a young graduate considering an academic career that was put forward by William Deresiewicz in a [recent edition of the Chronicle of Higher Education](#). Deresiewicz points out that there are powerful *disincentives* for talented students to enter the profession: undergraduate debt, the interminable path to a graduate degree, the loss of opportunity to pursue a more lucrative career, the abysmal state of the job market, and once awarded a position, the perils of assistant professorship. Tenure, however unlikely at this point, is the one *incentive* that makes these talented individuals willing to give it a shot. Who in their right mind is going to try to run that gauntlet if the best they have to hope for is a series of short-term contracts to be determined by an administrator generally unqualified to decide the retention of a future scholar?