

NOTE

1. Certainly, tenure is not necessary for individuals to report malfeasance. See Couzin (2006) for a discussion of a recent case in which several graduate students, at great personal cost, reported fraud committed by their supervisor.

Tenure is fine, but rank is sublime

DOI: 10.1017/S0140525X06009289

Douglas Peters

Department of Psychology, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND 58202-8380.

douglas_peters@und.nodak.edu

Abstract: Does tenure serve its original purpose of promoting freedom of inquiry for academics in teaching and research? It seems not. Of concern is the finding that achieving tenure does not translate into a significant increase in exercise of freedom of inquiry either in teaching or research. Why? Promotion evaluation for associate professors by their senior colleagues has a continued inhibiting effect.

The target article by Ceci et al. addresses an important issue facing higher education today. What are the consequences, good and bad, of the tenure system for faculty, the institutions they serve, and society in general? The authors review some of the concerns currently being expressed by critics of tenure in academe, and give several cogent examples of challenges to the system and academic freedom coming from both the political right and the political left. As example of the former, the right, are outcries for the firing of Ward Churchill, a tenured ethnic studies professor at the University of Colorado who called some victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks “little Eichmanns” in an online essay; example of the latter, the left, are demands for job termination for several professors (Arthur Jensen, J. Philippe Rushton, Richard Herrnstein, and Charles Murray) who advocate a strong heritability component for human intelligence. At present a battle exists, with supporters and opponents of tenure trying to influence university policy committees (e.g., at the University of Colorado–Boulder), legislators, and members of the public.

Ceci et al. suggest that a neglected topic in this debate is the question whether tenure and academic freedom serve their original purpose of promoting freedom of inquiry for academics in teaching and research. The authors’ survey of 961 professors from 50 top-ranked colleges and universities looked at this issue with some interesting results. It would have been nice, however, to see a similar sample from smaller and lesser-ranked schools, of which there are a large number in the United States: Are the tenure and promotion criteria and practices comparable? If they are not (e.g., less demanding tenure and promotion evaluations or more collegiality among ranks), then these findings may be somewhat limited.

On the positive side, the full professors in the study showed no strong tendency of becoming, in their beliefs of their colleagues, a “post-tenure renegade professor,” that is, confrontational, demanding his or her way, and unwilling to compromise. If this is accurate, as studies of behavioral forecasting, personal biases, and social psychology show – people tend to predict the behavior of others quite well – then some criticism of tenure and promotion may be dampened by this finding. I will say, though, that in my 30 years as an academic, I have experienced on several occasions what could be called the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde effect: a quiet, respectful, nonconfrontational junior colleague transformed at tenure – but most often with promotion to full professor – into a self-centered, combative, nonconciliatory alpha beast, who often will scare the hell out of very junior or new faculty with the consequence of severely diminishing their willingness to assert their rights of academic freedom (e.g., teach or conduct research not approved by senior faculty or speak in favor of controversial positions).

Perhaps the most important finding in Ceci et al.’s study involves the very limited “freeing” effect tenure produces relative to promotion to full professor. This is clearly seen in the similarity between the responses of tenured associate professors and those of the non-tenured assistant professors on issues regarding reporting ethical misconduct and abandoning unpopular (to the senior professors) teaching and research activities. Ceci et al. characterize the assistant and associate professors’ timidity, compared to full professors’ attitudes, as an abrogation of the former’s academic freedom, and I would agree. One could sympathize with assistant professors facing both tenure and promotion evaluations (and a degree of unfamiliarity and inexperience regarding their academic roles), but what about the tenured associate professors? Why are many of them not as assertive as their full professor colleagues regarding activities relevant to academic freedom? The answer is that, as they say in the military, rank has privileges. No one in the military would consider it a good career move to criticize or oppose the wishes or feeling of those higher in rank tasked with his or her evaluation and promotion – it would be viewed as career suicide. Not to suggest that academe is a quasi-military hierarchy, but the social dynamics (academic freedom be damned) appear similar. The sad fact is that, as the authors recognize, it may take 10 to 20 years for a professor to reach full professorship, and their data suggest that during that critical period of professional development and accomplishments, full exercise of academic freedom is likely not to occur because of evaluation/promotion considerations.

The cost of this dampening effect is what concerns me most. What innovative, creative, groundbreaking, and yes, controversial research (e.g., stem cell) and classes are shelved by those academics facing the 10 to 20 years of review and evaluations leading to the Holy Grail of full professorship at their institution? Steve Ceci and I did a controversial 2-year study of the peer-review process in prestigious psychology journals (Peters & Ceci 1982) while we were still non-tenured assistant professors. Our study received much publicity (e.g., from *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* and from *Science*), and we received over 1,000 supportive letters from colleagues in the United States and Europe, but our senior, tenured colleagues were very critical of our work, with some characterizing it as “juvenilia” unworthy of serious study. A nasty tenure battle subsequently occurred for one of us, with the peer review study cited as being “unprofessional” and a reason for nontenure. Fortunately, more reasoned heads prevailed, but the point had been made: Academic freedom is not a given for junior faculty. Displease those senior colleagues evaluating you at great risk to your career. I would have thought then, 25 years ago, that the awarding of tenure would change one’s outlook regarding academic freedom and opportunity; but experience, and now the empirical findings of Ceci et al.’s work, have tempered that view considerably.

Tenure as a necessary but not sufficient requirement for academic freedom

DOI: 10.1017/S0140525X06009290

John Ruscio^a and April Kelly-Woessner^b

^aDepartment of Psychology, The College of New Jersey, Ewing, NJ 08628; ^bDepartment of Political Science, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA 17022.

ruscio@tcnj.edu kellya@etown.edu

http://www.etown.edu/PoliticalScience.aspx

Abstract: Although the job security afforded by tenure is one important factor in deciding whether or how to exercise academic freedom, professors must weigh a number of other important career goals that constrain their choices. This multiplicity of goals, combined with concerns about career mobility, may help to explain the differences Ceci et al. observe between professors at different ranks.