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Professors fear losing academic freedom if tenure ended, but critics say it reduces flexibility

Proponents, critics explain what professors’ job security means to them in wake of proposal to change system

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With Gov. Scott Walker and legislative Republicans proposing to end faculty tenure in Wisconsin law, the long-cherished job security program for UW System professors is going through a rare moment in the public spotlight.

Critics argue tenure is an anachronistic system that limits university flexibility by guaranteeing professors a “job for life,” while defenders maintain the only things tenure guarantees are academic freedom and educational quality.

On the sidelines, many observers, both college graduates and those who have never set foot on a UW campus, are left wondering: What exactly is tenure and why does it exist?

UW-Eau Claire faculty representative Geoff Peterson acknowledged those basic answers are difficult to explain, but he summarized tenure this way: “In the modern university era, tenure has come to represent an agreement between the university and faculty members that we see the research and the work you do as valuable and we’d like to keep you around for a while.”

While tenure by no means guarantees a job, university sources said it essentially means professors who make it through a rigorous gauntlet of performance reviews for six or seven years can’t be fired easily.

At UW-Eau Claire, about 50 percent of probationary, or tenure-track, faculty survive that process and become tenured faculty, said Mike Wick, associate vice chancellor for academic affairs and dean of graduate studies. The others either leave voluntarily or have their contracts non-renewed.

“I think that speaks volumes about those who do make it through and get tenure,” Wick said. “The idea that there are all these lazy, unproductive faculty members who are a problem is really a misrepresentation of what’s out there.”
UW-Stout Chancellor Bob Meyer said faculty members typically earn tenure after demonstrating they are high-achieving in instruction, research and service to the university and the community.

Tenured faculty then are protected from being laid off because of routine financial difficulties or minor issues. However, they still can be laid off if a financial emergency is declared or if they fail to fulfill their contract duties or commit a serious violation.

Petre “Nelu” Ghenciu, UW-Stout’s faculty representative and Faculty Senate chairman, called it a trust issue, saying professors who make it through the tenure process have earned the right to be evaluated every three to five years instead of annually. He equated it with professional sports teams that seek to lock up their proven franchise players with long-term deals.

While a few bad teachers may have tenure, that’s the exception, and longstanding successful policies should not be changed because of a few rare exceptions, said Ghenciu, a math professor.

Changes proposed

Walker proposed in January eliminating tenure in state law — the strongest protection in the nation — and the Republican-controlled Joint Finance Committee approved the idea earlier this month and took it a step further by proposing a law change to make it easier to fire those with tenure.

Under the new provisions, tenured professors could be fired “when such an action is deemed necessary due to a budget or program decision requiring program discontinuance, curtailment, modification or redirection.”

“That is troublesome language, to say the least,” Peterson said.

State Sen. Sheila Harsdorf, R-River Falls, who co-sponsored the proposal to remove tenure from state law and change the job protection language, said she recognizes tenure as an important tool to keep and attract the best faculty on UW campuses and insisted the change was merely a way to bring Wisconsin in line with other states by enabling the Board of Regents to establish tenure policies.
The UW Board of Regents responded quickly by passing a resolution June 5 adopting a tenure policy with the exact wording of what is proposed to be stricken from state law.

The Legislature is expected to vote on the proposals this month or next when passing the 2015-17 state budget.

‘Sacred cow’

Collin Roth, managing editor of conservative Milwaukee-based political website Right Wisconsin, labeled tenure a “sacred cow” that is ripe for reform. He characterized it as “basically guaranteeing someone a job for life.”

“For most other people, that type of job security is unheard of,” he said, noting that the vast majority of workers deal with the uncertainty of at-will employment.

In a recent column titled “3 Reasons the UW System Should Dump Tenure,” Roth cited tenure’s high costs, inflexibility and stifling of innovation as reasons it should be eliminated or substantially changed.

“In an era in which we’re trying to stretch our dollars and concerned about the cost of higher education and dealing with a competitive global environment, we need to give colleges the ability to be nimble and respond to the needs of emerging employment fields,” Roth said in an interview.

He offered a hypothetical example in which the tenure system could limit a college’s ability to reduce its number of medieval history professors to add high-demand information technology professors.

A possible compromise between maintaining tenure and switching to at-will employment would be offering multi-year contracts to professors, Roth said.

Academic freedom

However, Peterson said one of the most important reasons for tenure is that it helps ensure academic freedom on campuses. That means tenure
protects professors from outside pressure — from politicians, administrators or the public — attempting to influence their research, teaching or public statements.

“Academic freedom is the belief that as faculty we should have the right to go where our research takes us and go where our scholarship takes us even if that means saying things that go against public perception or political correctness,” Peterson said.

The idea is that academics should not face political consequences, such as the possibility of being fired, for saying things that are unpopular or challenging students’ preconceived notions, he said.

History is filled with examples of faculty who faced criticism for reporting research findings that at the time were highly controversial but now are accepted truths, Peterson said. Two prominent ones he mentioned are that smoking causes cancer and that blacks have the same intellectual capability as whites.

Even today there are efforts to fire or silence academics for making statements about climate change or releasing research results about politically charged topics such as so-called right-to-work laws, said Peterson, chairman of UW-Eau Claire’s Political Science Department.

“We have to be able to raise those sorts of controversial questions or those questions never get asked,” he said.

Wick called tenure and its role in protecting academic freedom “central to the integrity of the academy.”

“The idea is that those who have proven they’re capable of contributing to students and to knowledge have the job security to do what they think is best for students and for learning,” Wick said.

Meyer added that the concept is by definition part of a university’s mission, explaining the term “university” comes from being exposed to the university of thought, or a wide spectrum of ideas.

Recruiting tool
University sources also argued that doing away with tenure would be disastrous for the UW System because its job protections would be worse than the standard in every other state, likely delivering a crippling blow to its ability to attract and retain high-quality faculty.

“It would be really, really damaging for us as a state if we did it differently than every other state,” Ghenciu said. “We want to attract people who are really good at what they do.”

Likewise, Meyer said, weakening the benefits available to UW System faculty, especially at a time when 90 percent of professors at peer institutions in other states make more in salary, would weaken the attractiveness of state universities as a place to work.

“That can only weaken the quality of the university, and I don’t want to see that happen,” Meyer said.

Ghenciu, originally from Romania, offered his personal journey as a cautionary tale, maintaining he came to UW-Stout because of the prestige of the UW System and the security of tenure.

“Without the tenure piece,” he said, “it would for sure have been a no-go.”

Lindquist can be reached at 715-833-9209, 800-236-7077 or eric.lindquist@ecpc.com.
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