

Notices

of the American Mathematical Society

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See, I Told You So

The University of Minnesota has redefined tenure so that a faculty member is tenured to his department rather than to the university; as a result, if a department or program is eliminated, then so goes the faculty. If you think that your math department will never be closed, then consider this: The math major was just eliminated at Illinois Tech. At the University of Illinois in Urbana the engineers have started teaching their own math courses and even their own Japanese courses. Erosion begins gradually. Look out.

Good universities, such as the University of Minnesota, are now establishing mechanisms for "post-tenure review". A professor can be dismissed for "lack of collegiality" or "not maintaining a proper attitude of industry and cooperation with others within and without the university community". My view is that professors are *supposed* to ask difficult questions and, when appropriate, cause trouble. A university mandate that emasculates the professor's right to do so is insidious.

The role of the university in society has changed in recent times. Academe is no longer a cloister: large research institutions are cutting deals with biotech companies and are appointing presidents with demonstrated business acumen. A university *must be able to raise money*. As a result, the sanctitude of academic freedom and of tenure can be easily forgotten.

Tenure is important to a professor of political science so that he/she can discuss communism or abortion rights or political correctness. It is important to a literature professor who wants to teach Henry Miller or André Gide. It is important to a mathematician, who may need a large segment of time to gear up and attack an important problem or who may have daring new ideas about how calculus should be taught.

Real knowledge is different from received wisdom or from bumper-sticker platitudes. Real knowledge has depth and is built upon earlier knowledge. The purpose of an academic institution is to preserve, protect, and make accessible the collected learning of mankind. Deep scholarship must be shielded from fads, from politics, from economics, and from oppression.

Academic tenure is a palpable symbol of society's commitment both to protect knowledge and to encourage its growth and free dissemination. In the interest of expediency, of mass learning, of downsizing, and of budget cuts, tenure is now under attack. Skeptics like to point out that a preponderance of modern technological breakthroughs have taken place in industry, not in academe; the assertion is arguable, but the fact remains that the people involved were all trained in universities.

The most important defense of tenure is this: the core of tenured faculty is the heart of any given university. The tenured faculty set the curriculum and keep it vital. The tenured faculty shepherd through the majors and train the graduate students. The tenured faculty create and preserve the intellectual life of a department. An institution staffed largely by part-time faculty is inferior as a place of learning for lack of this continuity.

Our university faculties preserve the accumulated wisdom of mankind, keep America on the cutting edge of technology, train new generations of scholars in the newest ideas, and *teach them how to stay on the cutting edge themselves*. If we leave it to General Motors and Microsoft to carry out these functions, then civilization as we know it is in jeopardy.

Tenure is not important just because it feels good. It has intrinsic significance. I urge all academic mathematicians to master the message of this editorial and to learn to promulgate it to those in power. You already know how to preach to the choir and to share with your colleagues the value of tenure. Now you should learn to explain it to those outside our ranks. If you do not take responsibility for this critical job, then who will?

—Steven G. Krantz