

# Tenure causes controversy among regents, professors

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found grossly incompetent. At the University of Texas in Austin, a five-year tenure peer review process was recently approved. The university's faculty members are saying it's going to make it easier to fire tenured professors. The University of Minnesota in Minneapolis ended a year-long struggle last month when regents finally agreed to quit trying to change tenure policies.

And at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, orders by NU President Dennis Smith to prepare a post-tenure review proposal prompted one UNK Faculty Senate member to declare it was a "war on tenure."

Here, opinions about tenure range from wanting to get rid of it altogether to wanting to keep it stoically the same. NU Regent Drew Miller of Papillion is one that would like to see it go. He said he's one of many.

"With all the protections you have in employment, you can't be fired for your views," Miller said. "The idea of a guaranteed job has gone away in every other place in our economy, and there's no reason academia should have this outdated concept."

Objections to tenure now are the same as they were when he was in school — laziness.

"As a student taking classes, I had tenured professors that were partly retired on the job," Miller said. "They can slack off and not get fired."

Even though he doesn't agree with tenure, Miller said he won't use his position as a regent to fight it. Getting rid of it would simply be too much and too long of a fight.

"There are other things I'd like to see changed at the university," Miller said. "It would take a lot of my effort and time."

In the end, he said, tenure will probably burn itself out anyway.

"Tenure's on its way out," Miller said, noting that it doesn't exist at many private schools. "If you've got a really good faculty person, the last thing you need is tenure."

"At some point, I would like to see the University of Nebraska say, '(We) will abolish tenure as soon as other schools in the Big 12 abolish tenure.'

I could see that happen in the next couple years."

No way, say UNL administrators and faculty.

"I don't think anything like that would happen here," UNL's Chancellor James Moeser reassured, but admitted that changes do need to be made.

That change will most likely be what is usually called "post-tenure review."

The name in this case is somewhat deceiving. According to the regents' bylaws, all UNL faculty — tenured and non-tenured — are reviewed every year.

After a probationary period of about six years, some professors are given tenure. At that time, they are promoted to associate professors. At this level, they are reviewed not only annually but also an once every three years to examine progress toward promotion.

If they are promoted to a tenured full-professor position, this is when post-tenure review (formally called periodic review of fully-promoted faculty) would take place. Right now, full professors with tenure have the annual review but no longer-range evaluations.

An ad hoc committee appointed by the chancellor to study tenure is preparing a proposal for the Academic Senate outlining a possible stance on the issue of post-tenure review. They will present the proposal at the Dec. 3 senate meeting.

If senators approve the proposal it would become policy. If it was not approved, Moeser said it could be done by the administration or passed to the regents.

But it's in the best interests of the university to plan it within the faculty, Moeser said.

Proposals of post-tenure review recommend evaluations every five or six years.

"Shouldn't there be some evaluation of those full professors?" Moeser said.

Faculty say maybe, but it depends on how it's done.

James Ford, an associate UNL English professor and member of the ad hoc committee, said faculty members

have a wide range of reactions to the idea.

"It goes all the way from people who think we should have more testing of our accountability to those who think we should be left alone, as responsible professionals, to do our job," Ford said. "I think the faculty is generally open to some additional measures of accountability as long as tenure is never in question."

Tenure is an important principle in upholding academic freedom, Ford said, calling plans like Miller's "foolish."

"It is only the university which has been made responsible by society for the free search for truth," Ford said.

Tenure has more to do with that freedom than with teaching or research competence, he said.

During World War I, before tenure, Ford said, four professors at UNL were fired because they were not considered "patriotic enough, not anti-German enough."

And that happened all over the United States, he said.

Moeser relayed similar tales, both ancient and modern.

Galileo Galilei is one example of a teacher who was ostracized for his

"radical" belief that the universe did not, in fact, revolve around the earth.

And closer to home, during the '50s, he said the university was pressured to fire a UNL professor who was teaching sustainable agriculture and challenging use of fertilizers and pesticides in farming. He was not fired because he had tenure, and sustainable agriculture is now a common practice.

"He happened to be ahead of his time," Moeser said.

The ad hoc committee has drawn up a proposal addressing some problems faculty have brought up with post-tenure review.

One big problem with the review process is the time it would take, not only for the professor being reviewed, but for the "peers" (other professors) that were conducting the review.

Professors will have to compile their published materials and come up with outside references.

"It's not without effort, it's time and energy intensive," Moeser said. "But the merits far outweigh the demerits."

Another problem discussed at length in the proposal is that the reviews focus too much on what would happen after a negative review. The proposal states that there should be a

positive focus for those who have good reviews.

Eric Marintzer, president of the Association of Students of the University of Nebraska, was appointed by the chancellor to give student input on the tenure committee. He said the biggest debate on post-tenure review would deal with negative consequences.

Marintzer said ramifications of a bad review could include salary cuts, forced teaching instruction classes and dismissal.

Moeser stressed the positives that may come from post-tenure review.

"We could even recognize the top tier of faculty," Moeser said. In recognition of outstanding performance, professors would receive money for travel, research equipment or a graduate assistant's salary.

Goals would also be discussed at the five-year reviews, he said.

"They will be forward-looking as well as evaluative," Moeser said.

Sketching out career goals, Ford said, would be an important part of the reviews as he saw them.

"The issue is primarily helping people reach their potential, helping them make the biggest contribution to the university, the state and the world."

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