

Congratulations on receiving a favorable tenure decision from your faculty colleagues!

The granting of tenure at a university in the United States may sometimes be viewed, perhaps cynically, simply as a reward granted in exchange for six years of heroic effort. Although receiving tenure should indeed be recognized as a singular accomplishment, it is also appropriate at this moment of mutual celebration to consider the true nature and purpose of tenure. You are entitled to enjoy the *rights* and *privileges* of tenure, but you must also accept the enduring *demands* and *expectations* that go with it.

The modern concept of a university traces its origins back 1000 years to the late 11th century in medieval Europe, where groups of students and teachers formed self-organized and self-regulating scholastic guilds. While universities have been around for a long time, the contemporary notion of *academic tenure* in higher education is actually a relatively recent development. Our current system of tenure is based on customs established informally over the last 130 years or so, and only since the mid 20th century has the regular structure and formal legal interpretation emerged.

The current formal nature of tenure evolved to reflect three special needs of academia in its role of serving society:

First, *academic freedom* is often cited as the core reason for tenure, and it is certainly a key tenet. Academic freedom is hailed as the principle that prevents doctrinal or political limitations to be imposed on scholarly inquiry. Academic curricula are developed and refined on the basis of intrinsic merit, not on the basis of non-academic pressure or threat. The fact that a tenured professor cannot be fired solely for pursuing controversial or politically unpopular lines of inquiry is one way of ensuring credibility and integrity of scholarly work: “that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found.”

Second, the foundation of the tenure process is *self-regulation*, meaning that the standards for tenure and the tenure review procedures are established and applied by the faculty itself. While there are certainly many constituencies that comprise the university, such as students, staff, administrators, Regents, etc., it is the faculty that define the university through the curriculum, advising, mentoring, research, outreach, and the quality standards by which the work is judged. Self-regulation of the faculty is intrinsic to the formal concept of tenure.

Third, the evolution of tenure has evolved into a key piece of *non-monetary compensation*. In a certain sense, tenure mitigates the lack of performance bonuses, stock options, profit sharing, and so forth that would be found in commercial for-profit enterprises. But in a larger sense, the non-monetary compensation of tenure enables faculty to take a long-term view and to establish an enduring commitment to the institution and its curricula. Indeed, this long-term commitment creates a stable academic community that is arguably the most critical element to the success of the higher education enterprise in the United States.

As a tenured faculty member the university is making a commitment of permanent employment to you. Other than financial exigency borne by the institution, or dereliction of academic duty by you as proven through due process, your employment will be renewed every year from now on. Yet despite that commitment by the university on your behalf, you are still completely free to quit and leave the university at any time and for any reason! There is a very striking asymmetry to this agreement, don't you agree?

Why would any academic institution in the dynamic 21st century agree to such a one-sided agreement that on the surface seems so firmly to the benefit of the faculty member? It is because in exchange for the *explicit* grant of continued employment, the institution makes an *implicit* demand that you embrace your role as an academic steward of this remarkable institution, that you live up to the obligations of the tenured faculty, and that you strive to serve your department, your students, your curriculum, and your entire university, for as long as you choose to accept the rights and privileges of your tenured position.

In conclusion, as a newly minted member of one of the last remaining robed professions—judge, religious cleric, and professor—we call upon you to rise to the challenge of your tenured position, and act always under the obligation to serve this academic institution with renewed dedication, integrity, and purpose. You have shown yourself to be prepared for the academic and professional challenges that will face you in your career, and we will hold you to your implicit obligation to share your knowledge and skill without reservation to all members of this academic community. While we take joy in honoring each of you this evening for the fine professional trajectory you have followed to achieve your amazing accomplishments to date, please reflect upon the obligations and expectations to which you now have agreed as you accept the invitation for tenure.

Congratulations to you all!

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