Can tenure be abused?

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In any higher education establishment, academic freedom is of great importance. The security provided to professors by academic tenure ensures that faculty are protected from termination because of their speech, research findings or political reasons. Without this security, academic progress could be stifled. But can this privilege and security be abused?

The American Association of University Professors originated the idea of tenure in 1940 with their “Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure”, which quickly spread to institutions of higher education across the country. This statement allowed for educators to have their job position secured for as long as they wished to work there. Then in 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in Perry vs. Sindermann that tenured positions must have a written contract, and that in order to terminate a tenured position, a process similar to a trial must be taken.

In order to receive tenure, most universities require the professors to have a strong dedication to intense research they conduct through the institution. To receive tenure is a high honor and something many professors strive for. However, there are extreme situations when the tenure track becomes nasty. At Indiana University, one professor issued death threats to those who opposed his promotion, and his wife went on a hunger strike for a brief period of time. In another instance, a professor at the University of Alabama fatally shot her colleagues after being refused a tenure position. While these are extreme situations, tenure can also have unintended consequences that affect many more students and institutions.

Tenure creates incentive for professors to ease into complacency with their jobs. With the knowledge that you cannot be fired, or that it would take hundreds of thousands of dollars and troublesome court cases to do so, incentives can slip through the cracks. Additionally, professors should prioritize educating their students, but without the consequences of failing to meet those expectations, professors are at ease to put most or all of their focus on their research that they receive grants and funds for.

A recent questionable instance of tenure abuse is the story around various tweets from Randa Jarrar, tenured professor at the California State University at Fresno. The professor tweeted shortly after the death of Barbara Bush: “Barbara Bush was a generous and smart and amazing racist who, along with her husband, raised a war criminal,” which was followed later by, “I’m happy the witch is dead. Can’t wait for the rest of her family to fall to their demise the way 1.5 million Iraqis have. Byyyyeeeee.” Jarrar received an overload of backlash after the tweets, and began to respond to those calling for her to be fired. She said that she would never be fired due to tenure, and even suggested that displeased individuals try to speak directly to the president of her university.
Another angle of this tweeting incident circles more closely around the issue of the limits of freedom of speech, and whether or not Jarrar crossed a line in her comments about the late Mrs. Bush. However, rights aside, Jarrar felt comfortable enough in her position to be outwardly offensive quickly following the death of a well-known political figure.

Tenure is an important aspect to advancing the research world of higher education institutes and securing the jobs of educators is valuable in a world in need of teachers. However, something must be done to ensure abuses of the power that comes with a seemingly permanent job are limited or stopped completely.

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