

The Future of the Professoriate

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One of the guilds that have been stable over the last few centuries is the professoriate. Higher education institutions such as the University of Coimbra in Portugal, founded in 1290, and Lund University in Sweden, founded in 1666, still actively and vibrantly pursue the mission established by its founders. They not only operate in very similar ways, but their operations have mostly stayed the same over the centuries. However, a significant change has been unfolding in the last decades resulting in the reshaping of one of the cornerstones of higher education, the reshaping of academic freedom. This transformation is noticeable but not limited to the United States, one of the biggest markets in this global industry, with over 4,000 institutions ([National Center for Education Statistics \[NCES\], 2023](#)). The changes may potentially alter educators who currently work in higher education and the whole professorate profession.

Academic freedom encompasses the freedom to conduct research and publicize corresponding results, freedom of teaching and discussion, and freedom to criticize the higher education institution without being censored. In the United States and countries that have adopted similar higher education systems, tenure is the materialization of such freedom and the institution used to define the professoriate. Indeed, job security, freedom of speech, and a prominent role in the university's governance are features not to be found in any other profession in our society. From a human resource management perspective, tenure allows higher education to attract and retain excellent candidates from other industries, promoting the achievement of their employers' goals and advancing the profession.

Tenure dates to the beginning of the twentieth century, when a Stanford University professor was ousted for supporting ideas not shared by the university founders and donors. As the decision became known to the public, damaging the university's reputation, some faculty resigned, bringing the topic to a broader discussion. As similar episodes surfaced, some American universities, such as Harvard, Princeton, and the University of Chicago, started supporting the institution of Tenure. In 1940, the American Association of University Professors created a framework that guided the adoption of tenure as a new industry praxis. The 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure defines tenure as a means to two specific ends: freedom of teaching and economic security ([American Association of University Professors, 1940](#)).

Outside academia, tenure has been traditionally seen with skepticism, an antithesis of the free market and free enterprise. The link between production and compensation is broken at the employee level by the economic security granted by tenure. Why would a (tenured) employee pursue excellence and superior results in the absence of incentives? On the other hand, why would someone invest years in education to acquire a terminal degree without attractive benefits and compensation in sight?



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Inside academia, criticism also exists. Problems include excessive concern about research compared to requirements on teaching and service, unrealistic expectations for tenure-track faculty that lead to a lack of life balance, and the creation of a division between the tenured and non-tenured faculty that is detrimental to a healthy work environment.

Indeed, freedom of teaching, which also includes freedom of expression and research investigation, allied with economic security, made the profession attractive in a period of industry expansion that started in the early twentieth century. An open tenure-track faculty position attracts dozens or even hundreds of applicants, including foreign ones. Although tenure was considered pivotal for both the professorate and higher education institutions to achieve their goals and commitments to society, the sedimentation of tenure as an industry praxis was only possible due to the economic abundance and enrollment growth observed for decades. Tenure became an undisputed institution and was taken for granted for a long time, a period of institutional wealth that could not last forever.

However, the growth cycle in the higher education industry seems to be sunsetting, at least in some developed economies, including the United States. Changes in demographics that brought a smaller number of students finishing high school, new professions that require no College degree, and economic pressures that reduced the average family disposable income have reduced the number of applications for college and increased the competition among higher education institutions. Simultaneously, several regulation and legislation initiatives such as FERPA, Title IX, accreditation, compliance with environmental health and safety, and financial aid, to name a few, have increased the cost of providing education services. Compliance with federal regulations alone may cost up to 11% of an institution's operating expenditures ([Vanderbilt University, 2015](#)).

The combined effect of these transitions with more recent inflationary pressures has shaken the industry. In the United States alone, at least 36 colleges have closed doors or merged since 2020; most of them were for-profit schools that are likely to close abruptly, leading to a significant number of students not re-enrolling in other higher education institutions ([Best Colleges, 2023](#)). The remaining institutions were forced to redefine their structure, which led to the reduction of scope and costs. Academic and non-academic programs and departments are being closed, and layoffs are pervasive. Regardless, several institutions are likely to close doors in the near future, even after such adjustments, as others will consolidate through mergers and acquisitions.

In order to increase enrollment, some institutions have lowered the bar and started accepting students that would be rejected just a few years ago; other institutions have decided to lower the academic rigor and integrity to increase attrition and short-term student satisfaction. These two decisions may be costly in the long run, mainly when conducted without substantial faculty input or transparency. Tenure seems to be one of the casualties of this process, as countless stories describe tenured faculty being laid off. The tradition developed over decades required higher education institutions to declare financial exigency in order to lay off a tenured faculty. The [American Association of University Professors \(2020\)](#) defines financial exigency as a "severe financial crisis that fundamentally compromises the academic integrity of the institution as a whole and that cannot be alleviated by less dramatic means." The potential damage to the institution's image makes the financial exigency be avoided. Since there is no formal obligation to declare it, tenured faculty have been let go without cause. However, it is difficult to affirm that letting tenured faculty go and eliminating tenure represents a better signal than declaring financial exigency. The faculty who remain in the institution are also affected in ways that are yet to be observed, and so is the institution's ability to attract new scholars in the future.

Interestingly, such an effect is not observable in prestigious institutions where financial pressures were not substantial due to large endowments, non-declining enrolments, or financial stability. In addition, a strong presence of scholars on the university's board of trustees seems to be another factor in deterring such efforts to sunset academic freedom and tenure faculty. Two clusters seem to be emerging in the higher education industry, one is thriving, and the other is fading, thus widening the gap between the traditional leading institutions and those that opted for the commoditization of higher education where economies of scale and cost reduction drive most decisions.

Hence, academic freedom and tenure will likely be limited to a few institutions with prestige, accumulated wealth, and tradition where research development will continue to be esteemed ([Berlinerblau, 2017](#)). Everywhere else, academic freedom will likely fade, and tenure may become a mere badge of honor, a distinguished achievement that feeds the ego, a bargaining chip with no face value, which can be substituted by a tuition waiver for dependents, an aggressive retirement plan, or even a generous health insurance plan. And the professorate at large will become a teaching-only profession with no place for research and service.

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