

# Tenure Will Be Harder to Get, Experts Say, but It Won't Disappear

BY DENISE K. MAGNER

**F**EW COLLEGES will eliminate tenure in the next 15 years, but many will become stingier about offering it and more creative in finding alternatives to it, according to experts who hashed out the issue at Harvard University this month.

Organized by Harvard's Project on Faculty Appointments, the special briefing brought together academics and journalists to talk about whether tenure is needed, and whether it is likely to continue.

Many of the public's criticisms of higher education "get encapsulated as the overindulgences of the faculty," said Richard P. Chait, a professor of higher education at Harvard and director of the Project on Faculty Appointments. "And tenure is the bull's-eye." Supported by a \$1.9-million grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the project is intended to disseminate research on the academic career through case studies, electronic data bases, seminars, and briefings.

At this month's briefing, tenure came under fire from such critics as Lamson Rheinfank, Jr., a businessman and former trustee at Williams College, and Colorado State Sen. Ken Arnold. Both dismissed tenure as lifetime employment and contended that it had weakened the quality of higher education. They predicted tenure's days were numbered.

"There isn't a president I've talked to—off the record—who believes that tenure is

needed today for academic freedom," Mr. Rheinfank said. He said that the First Amendment protects the free speech of college professors, and that tenure was simply a "smokescreen" for job security.

## PERSUADING A GOVERNING BOARD

Both professors and presidents came to tenure's defense, however.

John B. Duff, president of Columbia College Chicago, which recently adopted a tenure system, said: "I've been in higher education for 40 years, and I'm more convinced about tenure's necessity than ever." His college's governing board, however, took some persuading when he first proposed that tenure be introduced at the college. "The board reacted as if I'd proposed we introduce cholera," he said.

But the college set up a tenure system that gives the board some flexibility, Mr. Duff said. For example, the college can fire a professor under the policy after he or she has received two negative evaluations.

"Most colleges can't attract the top-notch professors without tenure," Mr. Duff said. "That's just a fact."

Some of tenure's supporters questioned how the concept could be perceived to have failed when American higher education is the envy of the world.

"Most quality institutions have tenure," said Irwin H. Polishook, a professor of history at Lehman College and president of the Professional Staff Congress, the facul-

ty union of the City University of New York. "They haven't adopted it because they wanted to make the institution worse. They adopted it because they wanted to make it better."

Mr. Chait said that dramatic changes in the faculty employment picture had taken place "without a frontal assault on academic tenure." He pointed to a doubling of part-time faculty members in the last 25 years, and a 42-per-cent increase in the number of non-tenure-track professors.

## ALTERNATIVES IN ARKANSAS

The University of Central Arkansas is among the institutions looking for alternatives to tenure. At the briefing, Winfred Thompson, the university's president, described his institution's solution. Beginning in the fall of 1999, newly hired professors will be able to choose the traditional tenure track or opt for a three-year, rolling contract that will provide them with a higher salary than the tenure track.

"I do think tenure is important, and academic freedom is important," Mr. Thompson said. "And yet tenure is like our criminal-justice system. All the protections are supposed to protect the innocent. But the ones who actually draw the protections are often the least-productive faculty."

Medical schools are ahead of most institutions in reconsidering tenure. Because they are heavily dependent on patient-care revenues to support their operations, med-

ical schools are increasingly appointing people to non-tenure-track positions, especially clinical faculty slots, said Robert F. Jones, associate vice-president of the Association of American Medical Colleges. And medical schools are limiting the financial guarantees associated with tenure, he said.

At the University of Kentucky, for example, Mr. Jones said, tenure guarantees a salary of only \$42,000 for clinical faculty members—those whose primary work is not research but patient care and teaching. The rest of a clinical faculty member's pay would come from patient-care revenues, which can be considerable.

Still, Mr. Jones said, medical schools are not eliminating tenure. "Come back here in 20 years, these same medical schools are going to have a tenure system," he said. "But it's going to be radically redefined."

He added: "It's not possible for schools to compete without tenure. You don't want to be the one to go out there and abandon tenure. You'd have to have every medical school get up and collude that they're going to abandon tenure, and the key word is collude." ■

\* **In-depth information** about tenure, including key documents and articles, can be found on *The Chronicle's* Web site at: <http://chronicle.com>

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