



Tenure no more

How one school eliminated faculty tenure

By Matt Forster

FOR YOUNG SCHOLARS with newly minted doctorates, tenure is the goal. For sage academics in book-cluttered offices, it is a badge of academic approval and job security. Paid for with diligent scholarship, streams of published work, and years of teaching, tenure is the most **sacred cow** munching on the ivy that covers the towers of academia.

But administrators and faculty have lately been questioning the tenure system. For board members, many of whom come from the business sector, tenure can seem like an unnecessary restriction on the administration and a drag on a school's budget. After all, corporations offer top executives golden parachutes all the time, but few are able to negotiate a golden ticket like academic tenure.

Tenure is much more than a labor concession, however, and boards should understand what is at stake. Its advocates see it as a bulwark of academic freedom and the only way to attract the best scholars to a school. And with so many vocal supporters, boards that are considering doing away with tenure should be sure to ask and answer the toughest questions about it: Is tenure the only way to attract the best educators and protect academic freedom? What does tenure add to our own particular institution, and can we thrive without it?

Winebrenner Theological Seminary eliminated tenure in 1998. The decision was not precipitated by a financial crisis at the school, which is an evangelical institution located in Findlay, Ohio. No dramatic internal or external pressures forced them to act. As such, the story of tenure at Winebrenner offers a reasonable look at how one institution made a hard decision — one the president and board felt was necessary for the seminary to accomplish its mission effectively.

A board's decision

It all began after a professor was denied tenure. One of the businessmen on the board encouraged the seminary's president, David Draper, to rethink the school's tenure policy. "Back then we talked about the tenure decision being a 'million-dollar decision,'" Draper now says. (Today he estimates it would cost a school \$2.5 million to hire and keep a 30-year-old employed until retirement.) This meant that a single tenure decision had long-term ramifications — a long-term hire needed to be the right person for the job right now, but also the right person for the job in 10 or 20 years. With the educational landscape changing so rapidly, how could an administrator know what would be needed that far off in the distance?

The decision to eliminate tenure turned ultimately on the question of mission. "Everyone has to sit down and look at what's best for the mission of the school," Draper says. "And the mission of the school — at ours and I would assume most in the Association of Theological Schools — relates to students, churches, and the world. So we need to make decisions for accomplishing that mission."

Winebrenner is a small school. In 1998, only seven full-time professors served on the faculty (the same number as today, although enrollment has since grown to about 75). To take advantage of its size and remain effective, the school needed to be



nimble. “We wanted people who were open to change,” Draper says. People open to change might allow the school to update the way it offered theological education.

Another point in favor of eliminating tenure was asking what tenure was teaching the school’s students. “Tenure was not a good model, from an educational standpoint, for the people we were preparing for ministry,” Draper says. “We do not send any people into tenured pastorates.”

Tenure proponents often argue that the system is compensation for low professorial salaries, but Draper says that ministers face similar financial challenges. He believes that professors can teach how to live a life of ministry by example. “As we like to say, more is caught than taught.”

The board initiated a discussion of tenure, and after full discussion, eliminated the practice. Dennis E. Bishop, the current treasurer, was on the board in 1998. “One of the functions of a good board is to support the president and his decision-making process, as much as that process is in line with what the board recommends,” Bishop says.

Of course, there were dissenting voices — especially from some faculty members. When a cadre of professors who had been championing tenure for one of their colleagues learned the board was considering the elimination of tenure, “they drew a line in the sand,” Bishop recalls. And when the board voted to end tenure, some professors were true to their word and quit. One professor gave up his tenure willingly and another kept his until he retired.

Bishop says that the board decision wasn’t unanimous. “But once the decision was made, the board stuck very close together,” he says.

Faculty protections

Two issues must be addressed whenever a board tackles the question of tenure.

According to proponents, tenure protects academic freedom and without it, professors may not be free in their scholarly pursuits. Schools with tenure may attract the best faculty, and without it, some top scholars won’t consider teaching at the school.

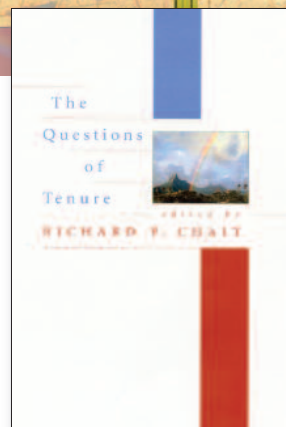
Winebrenner protects academic freedom in its handbook of operation, and professors have some job security in the form of rolling contracts. New professors start with two-year contracts. In their fifth year, they receive renewable three-year contracts. And the tenth year introduces four-year contracts.

The question of whether the seminary would still attract good candidates was debated in 1998, but since the decision, Draper says he has never been at a loss for excellent candidates to fill openings. “We created a system where we addressed the concerns of those who wanted to preserve academic freedom and also give some sense of security,” Draper says.

With all tenured professors now retired, and current faculty on rolling contracts, tenure has become a non-issue at Winebrenner. The change has opened the door for the school to transform itself. “We do theological education year-round now,” Draper says. “Professors teach in the summer, with loads equal to spring and fall, and three times a year they get a month off.”

Faculty also teach in the evenings, and they offer one-week intensives and weekend classes — all structured around the schedule of a “typical” student who is also active in ministry. As such, Winebrenner hires faculty with the understanding that they will be as flexible as the program requires.

“We believed we were making a good educational decision and a good business decision,” Draper says. “I don’t hear any grumbling at all.” Rather, faculty and staff work closer than ever to achieve the goal of creating ministry leaders to serve the church and change the world. **IT**



*For one look at how tenure affects schools, see **The Questions of Tenure**, edited by Richard Chait (Harvard University Press, 2005), which presents data from colleges and universities — both those with tenure and those without — to paint a comprehensive picture of how the issue plays out at different institutions.*

The Association of Theological Schools policy statement on “Academic Freedom and Tenure” is online at www.ats.edu/about/Documents/OBATSPolicyStatements.pdf.

Matt Forster, a freelance writer, lives in Goodrich, Michigan. He is a member of In Trust’s Writer Workshop.