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Faculty Response to the Dean's White Paper on Tenure, 1994

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Faculty Response to the Dean's White Paper on Tenure

[Approved by the faculty of Rhodes College in the spring of 1994; reapproved for the 1994-95 academic year]

The faculty of Rhodes College acknowledges the concerns expressed by the Dean, President Daughdrill and the Board of Trustees regarding tenure. It is indeed a matter of concern if a college faculty becomes disproportionately aged. We are in complete agreement with any statement that suggests the faculty should ever be improving itself. The high ideals of scholarship to which we have dedicated ourselves demand nothing less.

We acknowledge as well that the system of tenure is unique to higher education and thus can be confusing to those outside academe. In the pages that follow, we will provide an explanation for the existence of the tenure system in general, as well as respond to specific questions pertinent to the tenure system at Rhodes College.

Tenure

Higher educational institutions of stature in the United States have subscribed to the tenure system for decades--and for good reason. As the American Association of University Professors (the standard professional organization for college and university faculty), noted in 1940, "institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition."¹

The system of tenure exists to protect and promote academic freedom, as well as to offer a degree of economic security sufficient to attract into the profession of college teaching men and women of ability. As the AAUP concluded in 1940: "Freedom and economic security, hence, tenure, are *indispensable* to the success of an institution in fulfilling its obligations to its students and to society."² In 1973, the AAUP added: "The system of tenure does not exist as subordinate to convenience and flexibility. The protection of academic freedom must take precedence over the claimed advantages of increased flexibility."³

Rhodes College (both historically and currently) respects and endeavors to meet AAUP guidelines on hiring and retaining faculty. The College seeks to recruit the most highly talented scholars. It promises to evaluate them rigorously and to recognize their accomplishments appropriately. Granting tenure to probationary faculty members who have satisfied Rhodes' demanding criteria guarantees the College not only that its senior faculty will be a highly

¹ "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure with 1970 Interpretative Comments," *AAUP Policy Documents & Reports*, 1990 edition (Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Professors, 1990), p. 3.

² AAUP, "1940 Statement," p. 3; emphasis added.

³ "On the Imposition of Tenure Quotas," *AAUP Policy Documents & Reports*, p. 38.

distinguished group of scholars, but also that the College will continue to compete successfully against colleges and universities of equal stature in recruiting junior faculty.

A Crisis in Tenure?

The white paper on tenure prepared by Dean McMahon points out that Rhodes College may soon face the prospect of reaching its self-imposed tenure ceiling of 67%. The exact timing of this event is subject to some debate, given that no hard data exist on when faculty will choose to retire now that the mandatory retirement age restrictions have been removed. If the percentage of faculty with tenure increases beyond 67%, will this constitute a “crisis”?

At most schools within the group of fifty colleges to which Rhodes compares itself, there would be no hint of a crisis. Most of the “nifty fifty” do not have tenure caps. For example, Colorado College, one of the most highly regarded schools in the nation, has a faculty which is over 80% tenured. Franklin and Marshall College has no cap and is at present adding new tenure lines. Macalester College has no cap and is adding over 30 new tenure lines to reduce the student/faculty ratio to 10/1. The schools in our geographic region with whom we compete, such as Vanderbilt, Sewanee, Centre and Hendrix, do not have tenure caps.

In addition, the AAUP, “while recognizing the concerns that motivate such [tenure] quotas, opposes them.” In its 1973 statement on tenure quotas, the AAUP concluded: “They are an unwise solution to the problem they purport to solve, and can have grave consequences for the institutions that adopt them. Moreover, they are not compelled, for there are other more nearly satisfactory alternatives available.”⁴

Certainly no college would wish to be composed entirely of senior scholars; having junior colleagues acquainted with the most contemporary trends in graduate education enlivens any faculty. But it is ultimately senior faculty members who contribute the most to the College’s national reputation. Scholars do not begin to make a name for themselves until after they have established a significant record of research and publication. Only after the first book (or major article, depending upon the field) is published and has received favorable reviews, does a scholar’s name begin to be recognized. Only then does the scholar receive invitations to speak and contract offers for new projects. Only then does the college or university that employs the scholar benefit significantly from its association with that faculty member. Such benefits and recognition typically accrue to scholars after they have achieved tenure, not before.

A faculty with high tenure standards, as is currently the case at Rhodes, that is over 67% tenured may be **an advantage**, not a disadvantage. Our opinion, like that of many colleges and universities (appendix 1), is that this will not constitute a crisis.

If one chooses to interpret the tenure situation at Rhodes as a crisis, the question remains: what is the best way to respond to the perception of crisis?

⁴ “On the Imposition of Tenure Quotas,” *AAUP Policy Documents & Reports*, p. 37.

Possible Responses to Exceeding the Tenure Quota

Again, it should be pointed out that the tenure quota to which we are responding is self-imposed and not based on general practice at other institutions. If the quota is something that we must live with it is reasonable to ask how best to go about responding to the prospect of exceeding the quota without harming the overall quality of the teaching faculty. We suggest that there are several options that should be explored.

1. Remove or raise the quota
2. Early retirement
3. Phased retirements
4. Terminal contracts for tenured faculty
5. Faculty exchanges
6. Visiting Distinguished Professors

1. The quota is a problem only because we have declared it to be meaningful. The obvious solution is to re-think this, follow suit with a number of other institutions and remove any quota. If removal is not possible, then raising the quota above the arbitrarily chosen 67% is the preferred option.

2. Early retirements: One possible solution is to extend the option for early retirement to faculty within a certain range of age. This has been done once in the past and resulted in some age restructuring of the faculty; in fact, it probably contributed to the current situation.

3. Phased retirements: Creative use of options such as faculty leaves (providing benefits, but no salary) or reduced teaching loads over a couple of years with substitution of part-time appointments.

4. Terminal contracts for tenured faculty: Some faculty who have prepared for retirement at a particular age may be willing to give up their tenure in return for a contract of fixed length prior to retirement. The result would be one less “formal tenure”, although the term contract would guarantee employment. The real gain would be that this would allow the hiring of another faculty member to a tenure track position instead of a term appointment (the drawbacks to term appointments are listed below).

5. Faculty exchanges: Facilitating faculty exchanges, perhaps between consortial institutions (ACS), would serve to bring new blood to the college. One argument that has been employed with regard to highly tenured faculties is that they tend to stagnate without the influx of new scholarship. The ACS may be able to provide a mechanism that would facilitate the exchange of faculty between member institutions.

6. Visiting Distinguished Professors: One alternative to allow the influx of new blood and remove the stigma associated with term appointments is to make use of more Distinguished Visiting Professor appointments. This will allow us to bring established scholars to Rhodes without increasing the number of tenured positions.

Undesirable Options for Dealing with Exceeding the Tenure Quota

The one option that has been most often mentioned is to convert tenure track positions to non-tenure track positions as they become “available”. Estimates have been as high as 20% for the number that could be converted.

A number of undesirable consequences will result if current tenure lines are converted to term appointments.

[1] Term appointments will require frequent recruiting. Every new appointment consumes hundreds of hours of faculty time and costs the College thousands of dollars. Frequent recruiting is not cost efficient.

[2] Junior scholars aspire to tenure track appointments. If they are hired on a term contract, they will not wait until the last year of the term to begin looking for employment elsewhere. Rather, they will begin looking immediately; and they will leave as soon as they find a tenure track job. Thus, tenured faculty will be continuously engaged in recruiting junior scholars for term appointments. The cost to the College in terms of faculty hours lost to scholarly activity (where the College receives national recognition and prestige) will be of major consequence.

[3] The College will be able neither to attract nor keep the nation’s best scholars with term appointments.

[4] Term appointments will not enhance the College’s reputation. Faculty on term appointments will soon leave; their scholarly accomplishments will be associated with the schools that provide them permanent employment, not with Rhodes.

[5] The conversion of tenure track lines to term appointments will be done willy nilly, as tenured faculty leave the College or as candidates for tenure are denied. Academically, this poses a danger, as some departments will be forced to shoulder disproportionate numbers of these term appointments. This will not allow consistency in the departmental offerings and may jeopardize major areas of study.

[6] Students are poorly served by term appointments. How can term appointment faculty, here for only a portion of a student’s career, serve as mentors? Who will write recommendations for students, either in their senior years or in the years to come, as students justifiably expect faculty to do?

[7] Alumni are poorly served by term appointments. Alumni ties to the College may be weakened if the faculty members they remember and cherish are no longer associated with the College or if up to 20% of their faculty exposure is only to term appointment faculty. Alumni who do not perceive the College as loyal to them do not typically give generously to the annual fund.

[8] Faculty on term appointments have no incentive to serve as advisors or do the other administrative work of the faculty. Faculty burdens currently shouldered by the entire faculty will be shifted to 80% of the faculty--with a corresponding loss of scholarly productivity and morale.

[9] Women and minority candidates are proportionately underrepresented among the present tenured faculty. Converting tenure track lines to term appointments will only perpetuate that underrepresentation among the tenured faculty.

Finally: occasionally it has been suggested that the use of part-time appointments could help substitute for the loss of tenure lines. Part-time positions are problematic for all the reasons listed above. In addition, it is even less likely that we can find local faculty talent which can substitute for the quality that we demand in our full time positions.

Conclusions

In the first place, we urge the friends and Trustees of the College not to assume that Rhodes is in a crisis over tenure. As we have indicated above, the only “crisis” that exists is one of our own making. It was the College’s decision to impose a 67% tenure cap. At that time, the decision helped to ensure that high standards would be observed. In the present situation, a decision to loosen the 67% cap may do the same thing.

Second, we ask that friends and Trustees of the College not assume that the Rhodes faculty is unwilling or unable to take responsibility for regulating itself. Rhodes College faculty do not recommend tenure lightly. There is no incentive for a department to retain a faculty member who does not meet the rigorous standards that Rhodes demands of candidates for tenure. Department chairs in recent years have not hesitated to issue negative recommendations for candidates who did not measure up. The faculty as a whole is not enhanced by tenuring scholars who do not measure up to our rigorous standards either. Recent recommendations of the Faculty Committee on Tenure and Promotion have not hesitated to reject candidates who did not meet the standards of excellence that Rhodes demands.

Third, we ask the President and the Trustees to think very carefully before converting tenure track slots to term appointments. For the nine reasons listed in the preceding section, we believe that such an action would have negative consequences for the College. So many people-- Trustees, faculty, staff, alumni, and, not least of all, President Daughdrill--have labored faithfully to make Rhodes a nationally excellent institution. Converting the present tenure lines to term appointments will make Rhodes less competitive in hiring faculty and less attentive in serving our students. Colleges typically make such decisions when confronted by financial exigency, not when devising strategies to improve their national status.

Fourth, if having more than 67% of the full time faculty is perceived to be a problem, we urge the President and the Trustees to consider alternative methods of reducing the percentage of tenured faculty. Attractive early retirement programs, the possibility for senior faculty members to scale down their workload to 2/3 or 1/2 or faculty exchanges might accomplish this without damaging morale and lowering the overall quality of the faculty.

Fifth, we ask the President and the Dean of Academic Affairs to work with the faculty in creating systems of evaluation that will accomplish two ends. The first end is that the College will nurture faculty members (senior and junior) so that they may ever improve upon their teaching effectiveness. In addition to computerized student evaluation forms such as the S.I.R.s, we ask that systems that are more educative and interactive--such as peer review (including classroom visitations, evaluations of exams and syllabi, the creation of teaching portfolios, and discussion of teaching techniques)--be established. The second end is that we work to ensure that both faculty and administrators trust the evaluation processes of the College. To further these ends, we urge that the College study carefully the national project on teaching evaluations conducted

by the American Association for Higher Education and funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts.⁵

Finally, we remind all of those associated with the College that granting tenure is not an act that threatens Rhodes. Just the opposite. When the College recruits the best junior faculty to join its ranks; when the College nurtures those faculty members so that they learn to teach effectively in Rhodes' demanding environment; when junior faculty members give of themselves to serve the College; when junior faculty members begin distinguished publishing careers; then everyone at Rhodes has reason to rejoice. The system has worked!

“The good,” said President Diehl, “is ever the enemy of the best.” Our goal is to recruit, hire, and retain the very best faculty in the nation--indeed, in the world. The tenure system exists to ensure that Rhodes will achieve that goal.

⁵ This project is described in the Feb. 9, 1994, edition of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, which we attach to this document.