

First, a brief history. Tenure rules do not trace back to the Torah or any other such authority. Indeed, they did not exist until near the beginning of World War II. Earlier one could remain forever at the assistant professor level. But then, as I remember it, Harvard established the rule of granting tenure as one's seventh year begins, with concomitant promotion to associate professor—or immediate termination. Where Harvard led, the rest of the country obediently followed. Given the serious shortage of faculty members after the war, there was no problem. This happy state continued until the late 1960s or early 70s, when our graduate schools began doctoring more candidates than they could place.

Now, two postulates. First, our primary obligation is the teaching of our students, not the production of research, which must be secondary. Second, the danger that as teachers we must avoid is the failure to keep our teaching vital. One can and should prevent stagnation in a variety of ways: by original research, which forces us to reconsider various aspects of our subjects; by attendance at regional and national meetings, where one can mix with fellow specialists in discussion of their subjects; and by attending summer seminars, a rarity.

As for the first postulate, the secondary status of research to teaching, let us be honest: no one in the real world gives a damn about our publications. Only our fellow specialists care. Why do it, then? Because, as I have stated, undertaking it can—or at least should—keep the subjects of our classes vital to our students and ourselves as we explore new ideas in our field and revise our class discussions to include them. And we can speak with the authority that goes with such discoveries.

Everyone is familiar with a distinct though rarely mentioned evil that our present tenure system produces. New assistant professors holding a recent doctorate are faced usually with a four-course teaching load, surely including some freshman composition and mastering of unfamiliar textbooks. Both are time-consuming. New professors have problems of establishing themselves and their families in a new community. On top of this, they must publish rather than put their classes first, and they have at hand only essays produced in graduate seminars and a dissertation, which may be ready to submit with a few changes to a publisher. Such a system establishes a false superiority of research to teaching.

But then they receive tenure and have ahead of them perhaps forty years as professors. Regardless of how poor their classroom work is, they cannot be fired. It should come as no surprise to find that almost everyone relaxes for the first three or four years, at which time a crisis, recognized or not, occurs: with tenure instructors may undertake further research, even though it is no longer required; or, all too often, they may continue to teach as always, with personality frequently more important than content, with steadily yellowing lecture notes, and without any fresh ideas about the subjects. Previously forced to keep up, with tenure they no longer have such requirements. Not everyone is a self-starter. I assert that the so-called protection that tenure provides has been mostly used to protect the increasingly incompetent (who may not realize or even care about their condition). Any competent faculty members who are professionally mistreated do not need its protection: today we have professional support organizations and lawyers.

I urge then that we continue to appoint new doctorates as assistant professors but no longer distinguish tenure and nontenure tracks. Surely it does not take six years to determine whether the neophyte will be a good colleague. Surely those who are thought not to be will be dismissed after the first or second year. Thereafter for promotion they must prove their value to the department as teachers whose activities evince new ideas that are shared with students. With such accomplishments they proceed to upper classes and graduate seminars. Only an actively publishing scholar should handle graduate classes and direct dissertations. This is not to relegate the teaching of composition and rhetoric to a lower status: outstanding achievements in such subjects are equally worthy of recognition.

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TO THE EDITOR:

Recent editorials by Carlos J. Alonso and others have suggested that there is a crisis in scholarly publishing such that young scholars up for tenure have been unable to place their books. However, I received a PhD in 1995 from the University of Washington in Seattle and since have published two books, *Comedy after Postmodernism: Rereading*

Comedy from Edward Lear to Charles Willeford (Texas Tech UP, 2001) and *Gregory Corso: Doubting Thomist* (Southern Illinois UP, 2002), both of which received excellent reviews from places like *Choice* and *American Book Review*. I have recently completed another book-length manuscript on the work of the Romanian-American poet and novelist Andrei Codrescu, and I am already in contact with a publisher. In addition, I have recently had a novel accepted at Seattle's Black Heron Press.

I went to school with a number of brilliant graduate students who published scholarly books at respected academic presses before receiving a PhD, but their books didn't help them find a job. Although publishing has been simple for them as they have excellent minds and write with ease, their interviews were outshone by those of other candidates. When these scholars eventually switched to careers in business, the academy lost quietly compelling colleagues along with the books they would no doubt have written.

I wonder if some of the people who have been hired at research institutions have given excellent interviews but perhaps don't have a taste for sitting alone in a room and perfecting a manuscript. Often people who teach well don't do well as writers and vice versa, and this might explain the discrepancy. Many scholars capable of writing wonderful books are introverted: they open up slowly over the course of a semester and have interesting and ironic things to say but might not be at their best in the one-shot

chance of a job interview. On the other hand, some extroverted people might excel in the hothouse atmosphere of a job interview but might not be able to do the ten thousand hours of solitary work that it takes to write an academic book: perhaps some of these younger scholars don't belong in the top research institutions.

Is this then really a crisis? After all, academia needn't necessarily lose the gifted teachers. There are some five thousand postsecondary schools in the country and many community colleges, and lower-tier and smaller private colleges often have faculty members who have never published an article but who are outstanding instructors. The top one hundred schools have traditionally been reserved for academics who are that admittedly rare combination of excellent scholar and excellent teacher. Some of my friends who were initially hired at an Ivy League school or at other top-drawer institutions have discovered that they don't like the enforced solitude and horrific self-honesty and dealing with outside reviewers that it requires to write and publish a book. They love to teach. And so at least one has turned down a tenure-track job at a top university in order to teach at an alternative high school for the arts where there is no pressure to publish.

Perhaps the supposed crisis is just a natural sorting process in which young scholars are finding out where they best fit?

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