

Profs and Losses

The debate over tenure has been passed by in the rush to build ritzy dorms and fancy field houses. And it's the students who lose out.

SHOULD PROFESSORS have tenure, that lifetime job security and intellectual freedom available to no one outside of the Supreme Court or—absent flagrant, repeated, and well-publicized acts of pedophilia—the Catholic Church?

Back in the '70s and '80s, Boston University's conservative longtime president, John Silber, continually clashed with the popular, left-leaning American history professor Howard Zinn, most notably after Zinn and four others—the so-called "BU Five"—violated a no-strike provision of the faculty contract by refusing to cross a picket line of striking secretaries. (Zinn taught his classes outside on Commonwealth Avenue.) Basically, Silber loathed Zinn's politics. To this day Zinn is convinced Silber worked to have him fired, tenure be damned (a charge Silber vigorously denies). Another of the five, psychology professor Andrew Dibner, hired a lawyer after receiving a letter from the school that led him to believe he would be fired. The backlash to all this was swift and public—student uprisings on campus, a *Globe* editorial, a deluge of mail—illustrating the often contentious relationship between a university's administration and its faculty. Although ultimately no one was fired, BU's administration continued to deny raises to Zinn until 1988, when he retired. He was making just \$41,000 a year.

Academic tenure has been questioned since it first appeared a century ago. In more political times, like the antiwar '60s or the Red-scare '50s, the offended administrations took an off-with-their-heads approach that, if it lacked respect for academic freedom, certainly had a kind of drama. Today, though, universities are quietly replacing tenured faculty with cheap stand-ins who command so little respect, they're actually organizing like migrant farm workers. Meanwhile, universities are spending



millions to make students feel like they're staying at the Ritz. An ultramodern fitness center is nice, but a university is only as good as its faculty. And it's the students who lose out if the professors get short shrift.

THE DEBATE OVER TENURE HAS flared up only sporadically since the Zinn brouhaha. In the '90s bureaucrats won-

dered why faculty should be immune to the downsizing so prevalent in corporate America. More recently, Harvard President Lawrence Summers questioned whether Afro-American Studies Professor Cornel West's actions, including producing a rap CD and guiding Al Sharpton's presidential bid, were consistent with those of a tenured [Continued on page 52]

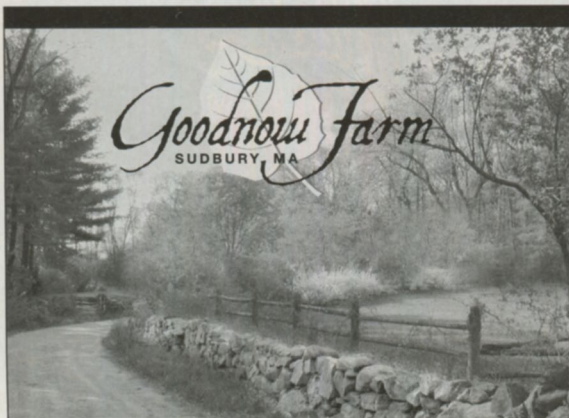


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professor. Other than that, there's been scarcely a peep. Why?

Because of people like Carol Dine.

For the past 12 years, Dine has taught an introductory English course at Suffolk University. By most standards, she's a great teacher. Students rave about her. Last year she was nominated for outstanding faculty member of the year—1 of 15 nominees, out of a faculty of 600.

She is not, however, a tenured professor. Or a tenure-track professor. Or even a professor at all. She is, according to academia's strict hierarchy, a "master lecturer"—a member of the lowly "adjunct

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faculty," those migrant ed workers who roam from college to college, paid by the course with no benefits or job security.

"I'm invisible here," she says. She doesn't have a private office, her name isn't in the faculty directory, she wasn't formally invited to the dean's Christmas party until this year, and she has yet to attend commencement. "They don't pay me to go," she says, "so why should I?"

By adjunct standards, Dine does pretty well, earning \$3,500 per course. Still, at the maximum two courses per semester, and another in the summer, that works out to just \$17,500 a year, which is less than \$10 an hour at 35 hours a week—not quite burger-flipping rates. Even after supplementing her income with tutoring, she's left, at age 58 and with a history of breast cancer, to depend on her mother for healthcare coverage and help paying the rent on a tiny apartment. All this with a master's from BU and two published books of poetry to her name. It could be worse, she says: One of her colleagues moonlights cleaning offices.

The rising number of adjuncts like Dine is turning the clubby realm of tenured faculty into a kind of nature preserve—a last remnant of a vanishing world. More than 60 percent of all Suffolk's faculty are adjuncts. Since 1994, the university has hired 328 adjuncts, as opposed to [Continued on page 54]

John Sedgwick's new novel, *The Education of Mrs. Bemis*, will be published next month by HarperCollins.



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58 full-time professors. Nationally, the number of adjuncts has doubled in the last 20 years, cutting the percentage of tenured faculty down to just 36 percent, according to Richard Chait, a professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Education and editor of a new book on the subject, *The Questions of Tenure*, published last month.

"The debate on tenure is perpetually endowed," Chait laments. "But the debate has much less effect than market conditions." By that he means that the economics of higher education and an increasingly corporate approach are making tenure beside the point. For a cash-strapped college, a \$3,000-per-course untenured instructor is an immensely appealing prospect compared with a tenured full professor, who costs at least \$100,000, once you throw in a computer system, research assistant, and benefits, according to BU economics professor Jeffrey Miron. Better still from the universities' perspective, adjuncts are powerless. They can be hired and fired at will. Tenured professors, by contrast, are unmovable. And Congress's 1994 elimination of a mandatory retirement age in higher education means they can practically die at their desks.

Zinn, for his part, says the economic argument is just the universities' excuse. "It's an administration's way of getting around the whole tenure problem."

Considering the inexorable tuition hikes, you might wonder why universities feel the need to drastically alter the system's fundamental nature. Aren't a university's tenured faculty its chief asset? Curiously, the explanation does not lie in the heavy financial burden of such a labor-intensive operation (labor costs account for roughly half the operating budget of a standard university). Instead, administrators have faced what Chait terms "runaway cost items" in three other areas: technology (all that fancy Internet stuff); financial aid (to make those tuitions affordable); and, most of all, student "amenities"—all those creature comforts considered essential nowadays (e.g., state-of-the-art athletic facilities, 24-hour security, psychiatric care, and the like). The elevation in amenities has been pronounced at most of the schools around town. Harvard's athletic area, not long ago a football stadium and little else, is now chock-a-block with new facilities, including a squash/tennis center that would be the envy [Continued on page 56]

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of most countries' Olympic training centers. BU's \$83 million Student Village project includes dorms with apartment-style suites overlooking the Charles and juice bars. Even little Suffolk is building a new \$40 million dorm. Presumably, at a time when marketing is all, cushy dorms are greater selling points than a few more tenured professors. But which would serve the students better?

Chait likens the whole tenure controversy to a baseball brawl. "There's a lot of pushing and shoving, but nobody lands a punch. And, when it's all over, the score of the game remains unchanged."

A FEW SCHOOLS IN THE area have fought the tenure battle openly. Curry College did away with tenure back in 1974, offering renewable three-year contracts instead. Hampshire College never instituted tenure when it opened in 1970. Bennington College famously ended what it termed "presumptive tenure" in a 1994 austerity move and has since given contracts of various lengths on an individual basis. Under Silber, BU made tenure optional at the School of Manage-

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ment and eliminated it entirely at the School of Medicine. But no other local colleges are known to be considering the wholesale removal of tenure at this point, and, as a matter of policy, it is hard to imagine that any would take on such a bruising fight.

What is so striking about the switch to adjuncts is how slowly and quietly it has occurred. "For the most part it has not been a conscious, central decision," says Cathy Trower, Chait's research associate. "It's not something that boards of trustees have weighed in on. It's just happened."

But just because tenure isn't being threatened from on high does not mean that it isn't being undermined down low. Universities, like other institutions, get what they pay for. For all Carol Dine's dedication, she is becoming burned out. Not long ago, she tossed Flannery O'Connor from the canon in a fit of pique. Consigned to the "adjunct room"—a large basement space segmented only by partitions—she [Continued on page 58]

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can't meet privately with students. (Other adjuncts have been known to work in their cars.) Paid only for her coursework, she receives no income for any scholarly writing, nor is she eligible for sabbaticals. And, of course, she has no job security.

To cost-conscious administrators, and their many sympathizers, tenure simply represents lifetime job security bordering on a sinecure. But job security is the only means by which a professor's academic freedom can be guaranteed.

"In an ideal world, I suppose it's possible to separate the academic freedom from the job security," says Debra Kaufman, a sociology professor at Northeastern who has studied tenure. "But we live in the real world."

Today, amid the antiterrorist frenzy, professors might be reluctant to speak up for, say, civil rights if they thought their jobs were on the line. Carol Dine certainly won't venture into that discussion. As it is, many adjuncts are reluctant to be quoted on any controversial topic at all. "I'm sure they have a press file on me already," one BU adjunct says nervously, insisting that all remarks be off the record.

As Kaufman explains, academic freedom is more than the freedom to be controversial. It's an essential condition for the disinterested pursuit of truth, which is—in case anyone needs reminding—a university's supposed mission. Universities are not immune to economic forces, but the discovery, development, and dissemination of knowledge is not akin to manufacturing widgets. "The academy is the last holdout as the space for pure intellectual freedom," Kaufman says.

Dine realizes she will probably never see that space. But in an effort to help adjuncts maintain their integrity, groups like the Boston Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor have started organizing adjunct faculty on local campuses. The coalition's cochair, UMass philosophy adjunct Gary Zabel, is the César Chávez of Boston's migrant ed workers. Since the corporate model is so entrenched in universities, he says, the only way to fight back is to organize, relying on collective bargaining to boost their standing and assert their right to academic freedom.

"It can only be protected collectively," he says. "If an adjunct wants to pursue grievances, he or she should come to us." It's not pretty, but that's where we are. The debate on tenure may not be over after all. It's simply moved to a new forum—the barricades. **B**