

UNIVERSAL TRENDS ON TENURE:

Challenges and opportunities of postmodernity.

Let's remember that the movement for freedom of speech in the classroom led to the concept and the practice of tenure or job stability for the university teacher in the United States. This concept was quickly borrowed by universities around the world, although with different connotations both in theory and practice. It is indeed very surprising that a type of vindication in the realm of spirituality becomes transformed into an economic benefit, without further discussion. But what are the tendencies today, at a time of globalization and postmodernity?

Some recent data indicate that in the universities of the United States, the percentage of faculty joining the institution through multi-annual contracts or formats other than full time and tenure-track positions, has increased 100% since 1970, while the proportion of full time tenure faculty has not changed. Moreover, there are institutions where tenure has not been instituted or inaugurated, and many others where, through state pressure, the practice of post-tenure review has been implemented. The meaning of this, altogether, although very few want to interpret it in this way, is that the immunity that tenure used to confer is no longer there. Some observers have asked if this is a small shift or a revolution!

To participate in this debate, as we university professors ought to, I propose the following bullets:

- 1- Postmodernity and globalization demand flexibility as a strategy to guide institutions through incertitude and to take advantage of emerging possibilities.
- 2- Incertitude appears in the landscape of postmodernity as a consequence of the death of determinism, along with all the conceptual rearrangements for dealing with the relationship between man and the environment.
- 3- The market and the corporation, the big winners in today's world, are telling us, everyday, that a major incentive for productivity is not exactly the immunity from losing your job, but the uncertainty about the future. Uncertainty is no longer the problem that should lead us to insomnia; it is a quotidian carrier of new possibilities.
- 4- Flexibility allows organizations to change goals and strategies very quickly to make necessary adjustments to the mission and the vision of institutions in response to the changing contexts of the world.
- 5- The management of incertitude, contrary to managing determinism, requires and allows a broad look – a holographic look- for solutions to the problems which no longer are "problems" but emerging opportunities.
- 6- It can not be ignored that along with changes in practically all aspects of human life, there came also an epistemological change, which demand a new organizational structure in higher education.

Under the new order the permanence of the individuals within the institutions depends on the mutual satisfaction of both parties. And of course, it is here where the human factor strikes. Doesn't it pose a peril for freedom of speech? Can freedom of speech exist in an environment dependent on mutual satisfaction? The answer is YES. What it takes is a clear understanding of the philosophical principles of the mission and the vision of the institution, and a proven will to practice them. Those principles, if worded out correctly, represent a conceptual map which entice you to reach the goals, but are not inflexible tunnels or roads for everybody to blindly follow. Of course there is room for the human factor. But, today, we can not be as naïve to ignore the reciprocity of the argument: the same assault that an institution could commit against the freedom of an individual, could be committed by the individual who, protected by the immunity of tenure, impedes passively or actively, the development of the institution. It seems that our quest is for justice in reciprocity, and not just freedom in a vacuum.

The hiring of adjunct professors, associate researchers, etc. through multi-annual contracts is a necessity of the present, with very strong economic implications: no institution could sustain a list of an ever increasing number of people necessary to attend the ever expanding possibilities for academic development, if these persons are to remain in the payroll for ever, not withstanding if their line of activity becomes irrelevant

in a quick-changing environment. The problem is therefore one of much relevance for both the institutions and the individuals: Is there any satisfactory alternative?

I propose that if the demand is towards flexibility and change on the part of the institutions, we, the individuals, ought to adopt the same strategy. Flexibility and change are a couple of desirable characteristics for each of us. Yes, the drawback is that we were not brought up for it; but alas! we'd better begin right now. We all, faculty and staff, are the institution itself and its future is within us. Let's organize ourselves around the concept of academic leadership and human development. Let's empower ourselves, introduce the new world in our personal lives, and let's profit from the opportunity of permanently constructing a new brain. These are the challenges and the opportunities that came along with postmodernity.

Tenure was an excellent complement to the structure of the departments although practically it served to restrict freedom more than to promote it. Tenure in this respect promoted the development of the disciplines by narrowly focusing the interest of the professor, there by limiting the possibilities for other types of scholarship. Retrospectively we may all agree, it was good for the development of the disciplines and the advancement of science and technology as we have experienced it during the XXth century; but the department and the discipline themselves are being call to reflect on the new realities and challenges. One of these challenges is the need for multidiscipline and for the recognition of diversity in

scholarship. (see Boyer, E. L. *Scholarship Reconsidered*, 1970) The need to get tenure, not so much for survival, because that is no longer the case, but for avoiding the stigma of denial, which is even worse, impedes the participation of young promising faculty members in risky adventures. How many times do they find an initiative that is passed onto them "very interesting", but "at this time...it is impossible"? The consequence is that after tenure, it may be too late for new, revolutionary, or subversive ideas, because the amount of accumulated stress is too high, or because other human events, such as aging, may make it easier not to change, but let inertia and entropy do the job.

The best and most romantically compelling argument to maintain tenure is the preservation of freedom. But are we really serious about it? How is it that freedom is preserved by having a few tenured faculty, while the vast majority of university professors and staff survive – many happily - without it? Tenure is a heraldic figure of the past and maintaining it alive through a few faculty, in a few institutions, does not make a significant difference beyond a symbolic reminiscence of past glories.

I believe also that there is a kind of self-deception in the concept and practice of tenure. Besides all the stress, the fear, and - many times - the hatred on the way to it, tenure became itself a means of discrimination against certain scholar styles and professions. Why is it that

about 40% of teachers of history are not in tenure track positions?, and most ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers (R. Wilson, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 24, (1998) and administrative staff, don't get tenure? Don't they need freedom? Perhaps, tenure was thought for protecting the intellectual dimension of the university professor - that is, the task of being a public person with the capacity for not only describe, but also justify and publicly defend his/her doings, as well as project them for leading the present and the future of society - But most of us have relinquished that dimension of our work!

One more reason for my belief that tenure must, or is likely, to disappear is the fact that nobody takes care of it. The old tenured faculty member, busy enough with research and other entrepreneurial adventures, considers the hiring of adjuncts and others to replace him/her in basic endeavors, as an earned stimulus and a necessary step to promote his/her scholarship. Well, those adjuncts and associates, as already mentioned, are apparently happy enough without tenure; so who does really worry?

Perhaps, in these new times, freedom, and the capacity to exercise it, is something which pays of its own. This is what some adjunct faculty and others have found: tenure would not allow them the freedom to have several jobs and a more enjoyable life. (Wilson, R. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 24, p.A9, 1998) These facts necessarily suggest that the death of tenure is going to be welcome by many! After all, if the security of tenure is no longer there, aren't we going to press

for competitive salaries in academia? It does not sound unreasonable to me that the death of tenure will upgrade the salaries of academicians across the board. If this is the case who should be worried, after all?