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Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

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Our Universities: Tenure and the Marketplace

Stanley Fish, writing in the *New York Times Opinionator* online July 11, 2011, comments extensively on the relationship of tenure, academic freedom, and current university life in response to a book by Naomi Schaefer Riley entitled, "***The Faculty Lounges: And Other Reasons Why You Won't Get The College Education You Paid For.***" Both commentary and book carry arcane and dated views of tenure. But here is a tenure fact for one of the largest state university systems in the nation:

The vast majority of faculty members appointed to the tenure track in recent years have experienced success, as evidenced by a rate of denial of tenure and non-reappointment of slightly more than 1%.

The California State University, Office of the Chancellor, November 2009

I worked with Christopher Alexander while at Berkeley, a man with a keen mind and a powerful view of architecture in the twentieth century. He took the position that architects themselves were the cause of the failure of "modern" architecture because they failed to respond to the needs of people. He argued that we would be better off with more user and citizen input into the designs of buildings and public places, because the public relied on experience and common sense - substance over style.

Architects lacked the humility and insight to accept knowledge they saw as mundane.

Alexander, in addition to helping pioneer the computer as a design thinking/doing tool, led a revolution of sorts in thinking about the architectural profession.

His ideas antagonized people. He challenged the status quo. He suggested that the profession was the problem, not the cure. In ***The Timeless Way of Building, A Pattern Language***, as well as in a lasting body of additional work, Alexander laid out a different vision for the profession.

He built his arguments, not at a faculty meeting, but in a studio; not in a union hall, but in a laboratory; not in a courtroom, but in his office; not on politics, but intellect.

The university exists in a powerful international marketplace that values original ideas, not ideological diatribes masquerading as insight.

While Alexander fought his battles with the leadership of the university, he was constantly bombarded with inquiries from universities around the world. *Would he like to teach here? Would he be the dean there? Would he accept an endowed chair?* His job security didn't come from his tenured position. It came from the power and quality of his ideas.

I soon formulated this paradoxical axiom regarding tenure: The people who have ideas worthy of tenure don't need tenure, and the people who need tenure for job security don't deserve it. The power of the marketplace outweighs the shortsightedness of people panicked by original thinking. Faculty members only fear new ideas when they worry about the defensibility of their own. This phenomenon has only become more common as universities have increasingly become political organizations rather than intellectual ones.

Christopher Alexander is the only person I ever met who might have been fired for his ideas had he not been tenured. I emphasize might because the university very likely would have gotten hold of its fear with both hands and said, "Wait a minute, this may be shortsighted." Their folly would have been immediately rectified by the clear-headedness of the marketplace. Alexander had ideas that both stirred and scared people. Under that scenario, the university must ask, "If not here, where?" And for these few people the marketplace makes redundant the purpose of tenure.

I have met two people with tenure who would have been fired had they not had tenure because of the depth and power of their ideas.

For a thankfully few others, the risk of firing did not come from ideas, but rather because faculty members did not do a good job: They were not good teachers, and did little to integrate whatever scholarly perspective they had into the public square of the program and students they served. Tenure protected them from these various forms of incompetence, and that is not supposed to be its purpose.

Our universities need to allow faculty members the freedom not to worry too much about the adverse effect of new ideas. However, there must be consequences when instructors do not perform their jobs adequately if few are to provide an education of substance to each student.

Tenure should not protect incompetent professors. It should protect promising, innovative ideas while their foundations are being strengthened enough for them to stand on their own if they can.

Galileo might have fleetingly thought he needed tenure, if he knew what it was, for championing a heliocentric universe. He didn't . . . because the marketplace prevailed.