Why theological schools need tenure

By Greg Carey
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Theological schools occupy a unique place within higher education. With relatively small enrollments and modest endowments, seminaries feel the cutting edge of change. Online learning, new degree programs, and nontraditional scheduling proliferate. And rumors abound that one school or another might shut down.

In the fall, Andover Newton announced a radical restructuring that involves selling the campus and downsizing faculty and staff; it may also entail a merger into (not with) Yale Divinity School. Pennsylvania's two Lutheran seminaries, in Gettysburg and Philadelphia, announced a reboot last month: both schools will close in order to create a new, multi-campus institution. One news report placed tenured faculty at the center of the problem:

> combining into one institution…could solve the thorny problem of what to do with tenured faculty, whose salaries and benefits weigh heavily on each school's budget.
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> The logic: if a school ceases to exist, then it's no longer obligated to retain faculty members, even if they had tenure. A new school has the flexibility to start over.

It's true. Tenured faculty entail great cost. They command higher salaries than entry-level and contingent (adjunct) faculty. They can be reluctant to embrace radical change, as their positions are closely tied to past decisions. Schools cannot easily redesign their instructional staffs when tenure is common. And so long as tenured professors perform adequately, institutions cannot get rid of them without announcing a financial crisis—not the sort of public message an institution wants to deliver.

So should seminaries embrace a tenure-free future? I don't think so.

The public tends to hear one primary defense of tenure: academic freedom. Tenure was invented to protect faculty from the winds of cultural and political change. It promised the freedom to pursue meaningful research and take controversial positions. Without tenure, one might more easily imagine faculty members fired for protesting segregation or the Vietnam War. (I know one such story.) Threats against tenure come up in state politics and in recent cases like those at Wheaton and Mount St. Mary's. Theological schools are hardly immune to such threats; we experience the regular ritual of conservative schools that dismiss faculty members over perceived theological irregularities.

Academic freedom is important. But there are other arguments for tenure that deserve equal attention.

Tenured faculty members establish a seminary's public face and its academic reputation. In theological education, faculty members engage with alumni and the public to a degree that is rare in colleges and universities. Theological schools draw students and money from communities of faith, and they reach these constituents primarily through their faculty. Those relationships require continuity.

Moreover, people—prospective students, donors, others—routinely investigate theological schools by scouting their faculty online. School websites tend to highlight faculty, indicating that schools recognize the promotional role they play.

What's more, **tenured faculty members invest more deeply in schools than term-contracted professors do.** Some argue that professors and teachers shouldn't need tenure to simply do their job like anyone else. But firms in fields such as law, accounting, and medicine routinely rely on a partnership system in order to retain their best employees and build institutional loyalty. Tenure does something similar.

I didn't fully appreciate this factor until I was awarded tenure myself. Immediately I noticed a different kind of personal interest in the success of new colleagues. I knew that my wellbeing, including my learning and my reputation, depended upon their success. I also sensed that my happiness depended on their not being jerks. If I had their permission, I began to look after them, mentor them, and occasionally protect them. Contingent faculty members have little such incentive to find and foster an excellent body of colleagues.

Tenure builds loyalty in part because of the dynamics of the job market. It ties faculty members to schools in a relationship of mutual risk. In a brutal market, who would abandon a tenured position without the promise of tenure elsewhere—and what school wants to obligate itself to a tenured person before they even begin working?

Term-contract professors, on the other hand, are always on the job market. Even with a five-year contract, they will seek other opportunities beginning in year three, if not sooner. Their attention will focus on their job prospects, while schools confront the heavy costs involved in hiring new faculty.

Finally, **tenured faculty members carry a broad perspective**. Many schools can find brilliant scholars and teachers and plug them into one classroom or another. But tenured faculty know the institution, its ethos, and its curriculum. They know how their course relates to others, how their teaching and advising relate to the whole educational process. Adjunct or contingent faculty rarely attain that level of institutional wisdom—an invaluable thing to students, though difficult to quantify.

Every theological school must find its own way, and the costs of tenure are heavy. Tenure is not appropriate for every academic position. Yet few appreciate the significant costs of overreliance on contingent faculty instead. In the long run, a strong tenured faculty is necessary in order for most schools to thrive.

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