

A Tenure Track for Teachers?

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Advice



Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

By Leonard Cassuto May 07, 2017

One of my doctoral students just got a tenure-track assistant professorship. That's excellent for her, but a decade ago, it wouldn't have rated mention in a newspaper column. Of course, that was before the amount of tenure-track openings dropped like a barometer during hurricane season. Today, getting a tenure-track position feels more like a "Man Bites Dog" event.

During that same period, undergraduate enrollment at American colleges and universities continued to rise — as it has for decades. Clearly more and more students need to be taught, so where have all the teaching jobs gone? They've gone to the same people who have been doing a lot of our undergraduate teaching all along: contingent faculty members, meaning graduate students and adjuncts. That's not exactly news to anyone who has been watching the faculty labor market — or to the graduate students doing so much of the work. In the humanities, we've seen nontenure-track jobs (NTTs) multiply year after year. As David Laurence of the Modern Language Association has shown in PowerPoint talks he's given on the subject, the proportion of faculty jobs that are tenured and tenure-track has been dropping steadily over the past two generations.

An important new wrinkle has been the rise of the full-time, nontenure-track faculty member (FTNTT). The FTNTTs teach full courseloads and receive full-time salaries and benefits, but work on fixed-term contracts that are usually

renewable, sometimes in perpetuity.

So FTNTTs have *real* teaching jobs. The emergence and growth of these positions raises two main questions. The first is idealistic: Should we value them because they're clearly better than adjunct jobs (which aren't full-time and typically lack benefits), or oppose them because they're clearly worse than the tenure-track variety?

That's an important debate to have, and the best time to have it was about 15 years ago. While we were avoiding that conversation, institutions were hiring more and more FTNTTs. Those positions are thoroughly with us now in a variety of forms.

Which brings me to my second question: Since those jobs now exist in profusion, what should we do with them?

Put them on the tenure track, argue Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth in their 2015 book, *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Academic Freedom*. Tenure, the authors write, marks more than academic freedom. It's "the social contract between the university and the faculty." Tenure gives faculty their professional identity and the university its legitimacy. "The professor is nobody without tenure," they write, "at least nobody anyone else has to be accountable to or for." Without tenure, the professor is simply an "at-whim employee."

In support of that observation, it's worth noting that FTNTTs rarely have the title of professor — they're usually called "instructors" or "lecturers." That seems no coincidence.

Bérubé and Ruth call for the formation of a second tenure track for people whose job is to teach, not do research. "The tenure process for such faculty" should, they say, "involve rigorous peer review, conducted by their tenured colleagues at the same institution, but would carry no expectations for research or creative activity."

It's already true that "the overwhelming majority of faculty in the classroom are not being paid to research," Bérubé and Ruth point out. That's the reality. They argue that "we need to be able to professionalize and stabilize these faculty" without making them wear a researcher's suit that doesn't fit — because they never wanted to wear that suit in the first place.

There are counterarguments, naturally. Good teaching and good research, it is said, reinforce each other. In colleges and universities, researchers teach, and teachers research (though Vanessa L. Ryan recently questioned that truism in her excellent article, "[Redefining the Teaching-Research Nexus Today](#)"). Bérubé and Ruth write that tenure is necessary "to foster innovation" in teaching as well as research. But should tenure then be granted to people who "just" teach?

And what about the prospect of a caste system? The two tenure tracks could turn into castes (it's not hard to guess which would be the higher), or worse, warring camps. There's also the slippery slope leading to the implication that people on the research track shouldn't have to pay attention to their teaching at all.

Those are reasonable questions that vex many people, including me. I also have a related question: If these are the jobs that our graduate students are going to compete for, how should that fact affect how we train them? In other words, shouldn't graduate school change in order to meet this new reality? And if so, how?

The structure of doctoral education has barely altered in more than 100 years. Features have been added here and there over time. Comprehensive exams, for example, came into being when student populations got too large to assess ad hoc. But the goal of graduate school has always been constant: It's structured to prepare people to become research scholars. Moreover — and worse — it grooms students to want high-prestige positions at research universities above all else, and to devalue the alternatives.

The problem there is obvious: Most graduate students aren't going to get tenure-track jobs at major research universities. And the disjunction between the preparation we offer and the jobs Ph.D.'s actually get — mostly at teaching-intensive institutions — has stalked graduate training for longer than the FTNTT job has been around.

Bérubé and Ruth's proposal of a separate tenure track for teaching-oriented faculty members shows how ill-suited the present tenure system has become for the workplace we now inhabit. The imperative is clear enough: *Academe has to change. But how?*

How do we reform graduate school to reflect the fact that most academic jobs — for those who can find one — are positions that emphasize teaching? And what do we give up? Academics are really good at adding features to a degree program, but we're terrible at dropping others to make room, which is why degree requirements become as bloated as prize pigs at the state fair.

Clearly, however, we need to privilege pedagogy in doctoral education in ways that we don't now. We have to think about how we teach our graduate students, including how we teach them to teach.

All of those issues are connected, and so are we, so we need to confront them in concert. Should we divide tenure into two streams? Should college teachers get tenure for their teaching alone? What happens then? And how do we teach graduate school to reflect the fact that most academic jobs center on teaching? How do we change our advising? As Bérubé himself has observed, the problems facing graduate school are knitted together like a "seamless garment."

Conversations about diverse career paths for Ph.D.s are proliferating around the country, and that's a good thing. But too often, those discussions are segmented and isolated from our "real" graduate teaching. We have to consider all of those facets together. Because if we don't, the status quo continues, and that status quo embarrasses the profession. As we all know, teaching-first jobs already exist, but we are filling them according to all sorts of different standards. The result, as Bérubé and Ruth make clear, is a lack of professionalism that harms us all.

Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, writes regularly about graduate education in this space. His latest book is [The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It](#), published by Harvard University Press. He welcomes comments, suggestions, and stories at lcassuto@erols.com. Twitter handle: @LCassuto.