

The Professor Is In: Is a Renewable Faculty Job Ever Better Than One on the Tenure Track?

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Question: What are the merits of a tenure-track job at a small college versus a term/clinical position at a major research university (R1 or R2)? I'm on the tenure track at a liberal-arts college, but on a very low salary. I have a possibility of a "clinical professorship" — a renewable term position — at an R1 university where I would earn a lot more money. But term/clinical positions are not guaranteed job security even at fancy institutions, right? Aren't those jobs thought of as second class in the higher-education caste system? Any insights you can provide would be appreciated.

Let's start by defining exactly what is at stake here: Tenure. But tenure is not just one thing. While the concept of tenure has become virtually synonymous with job security and permanence, that is actually not always the case.

Historically tenure was supposed to guarantee "academic freedom" — the idea being that professors should not be fired for controversial research because freedom of academic speech and exploration benefits society at large. But tenure is not all-powerful. The appointment it grants you is indefinite, but not necessarily permanent:

- First, tenure does not protect you from being fired for cause (although sometimes it seems that way in certain egregious cases).
- More relevant to this discussion, tenure does not protect your employment when your institution claims "financial exigency" and decides to restructure. At best, that might mean your department is eliminated and you get reassigned to another one. At worst, a restructuring might eliminate your program and your job entirely, or shut down the college altogether.

The economics of your institution in many ways matter more than your being on the tenure track there. A clinical professorship at a wealthy R1 — especially in a field that is not going to run out of money (business schools, I am looking at you) — is, in all likelihood, a more secure gig than a tenure-track or tenured line at a place like Marylhurst College in Oregon, which shuttered its doors in 2018, or Sweet Briar College in Virginia, which almost closed in 2015 but was spared by a grassroots campaign by faculty, students, and alumni. Tenure at a financially insecure institution is, shall we say, precarious at best.

Your letter indicates you are staring down the barrel of a very low salary for the foreseeable future at your small college. Given that comment, I'm guessing you aren't at a well-endowed place like Swarthmore or Amherst (which are more similar to R1s than to underfunded SLACs). In considering whether to leave the tenure track for a clinical position at an R1, here are some things that should factor into your decision:

How nominal or real is tenure at your small college? That's another way of asking: How financially stable is the place? It would behoove you to understand your institution's funding structure. Is it tuition-driven? If so, how are the enrollments trending? Has it had visible instability — like a no-confidence vote in the president or a revolving door of provosts? What about salary freezes?

Maybe your hiring is too recent for you to know those things firsthand. So do a little research: If your college has eliminated programs or fired tenured professors in past years for financial exigency, that's something that would have received some type of news coverage, at least locally.

If the college seems on financially shaky grounds, don't overvalue the promise of "tenure" there. Depending on how bad its economic situation is, your department might not exist by the time you come up for third-year review or tenure. Sure, that is a worst-case scenario — but a far-from-implausible one at many struggling institutions.

How precarious is the clinical position you are considering? Many institutions have positions that are not quite "tenure equivalent" but do hold a promise of long-term security in increasingly long increments. A three-year contract may give way to five-year contract, and then to a seven-year contract, and so on.

Here, too, you need to do a little digging: If the university offering you the clinical position is in good financial shape, and has a history of regularly renewing the contracts of clinical faculty members, chances are you will be OK in terms of continuity of employment.

What resources will you have at the college versus the university? Again, economics are the driving factor here. Tenure at a struggling college won't mean much if you need help paying for summer fieldwork or conference travel costs and the place only contributes peanuts to a faculty conference-travel fund — and in years that ends with a prime number.

By comparison, you're going to be able to maintain your research much more easily — even in a renewable, non-tenure-track position — at a wealthy university that earmarks significant funds for conference travel, archive visits, and the like for all of its faculty members (assuming that includes clinical professors as it often does at R1s and R2s).

Note: The question of resources has its own particulars when you are in a STEM field, especially in a medical- or public-health school. There, the distinction between tenure-track and non-tenure-track positions is somewhat secondary to whether your job is financed by soft money (external grants) versus hard money (tuition, endowment money). Even so, a clinical professor of public health who is bringing in big federal grants at an R1 university will go a lot further careerwise than a tenured professor of public health with minimal grants and 4-4 teaching load at a small under-funded college.

What are your career goals? And how do they fit each position? The deciding factor may be unrelated to the substance of the job. For instance, someone who wants to live in a particular city or state will make the job's location the deciding factor.

Others may simply feel insecure without tenure, or the promise of it. Tenure — even at a college with a questionable financial future — still has that golden aura about it as the pinnacle of academic success. Tenure as the ultimate career cap has been drilled into academics since early in their training. So some may worry: If I leave the tenure track, is that it? Will I ever get a shot at a tenure line again?

My take: Yes, there is some truth to the idea that it is easier to land a tenure-track job from a tenure-track job. But realistically, the top currency in the academic market — the key thing

that buys you "upward mobility" — is scholarly renown as measured in peer-reviewed publications. If a clinical position at a major university would afford you significantly greater resources than your tenure-track job at a small college where you have to teach so much that you will never publish your way out for sheer lack of time, then — depending on your career goals — that non-tenure-track gig might be worth taking.

If you are choosing between two jobs — both of which you hope will be stepping stones — it is very reasonable to choose in favor of the one offering a richer, and more stable, mix of resources evaluated in light of our precarious and rapidly changing academic economy.

Karen Kelsky is a career consultant who runs the website The Professor Is In. She's been a tenured professor at two public universities (Oregon and Illinois) and has advised many undergraduate and graduate students, as well as mentored junior faculty. She answers reader questions as a contributor to Vitae.



For more advice, order Dr. Karen's new book, The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. Into a Job.

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