

On Tenure

Remarks to Newly Tenured Faculty

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Great teachers have been part of Cornell's history from the beginning. Andrew D. White selected his first faculty with great care, traveling to other universities in this country and in Europe to secure them. And he knew what he was looking for: individuals who had "the power of discovering truth and the power of imparting it," traits that White believed were "almost invariably found together."

Great teachers, great scholars, and great mentors have been central to the educational experience that has made Cornell beloved to its students ever since. It is inspiring to see that commitment to scholarly excellence, across all its dimensions, carried forward in our newly tenured faculty.

The hardest working people I know are tenured professors. At a university like Cornell, professors must produce work of a quality that leaves no room for doubt – they must have the ability to produce discipline-leading work, and they must have the drive to capitalize on that ability. These are people whose need to conduct research, to write, and to teach drives them to go for years on very little sleep.

The most self-critical people I know are also tenured professors. People for whom the praise of others is never quite enough. Who are constantly wondering whether they are worthy, even as they are transforming human understanding and opening up new worlds for their students.

I wouldn't go quite so far as to suggest that they would continue to do what they do even if they had to do it pro bono. But it is true that a remarkable number of Cornell professors continue their research and

scholarship, continue to publish their work, and continue to teach and mentor students long after they have officially become emeritus. Their public achievements are the outward expressions of a private passion for contributing something of lasting value to the world.

Why, then, have tenure? If our professors are so hard-working and so brilliant and so committed to doing an exceptional job, wouldn't a more conventional contract provide enough incentive for them to keep up their good work? And wouldn't that kind of quid pro quo reward system be more understandable and more readily accepted by the outside world?

And I have several answers to that. The first is that tenure provides a way to institutionalize a long time horizon and an appetite for risk. Tenure represents an institutional commitment to put a higher value on wisdom than on the mere accumulation of information and to prize originality and creativity above the safe bet and the sure thing. It encourages us to strive for the truly path-breaking insight rather than simply the "least publishable result." To put it in corporate terms, tenure is an attempt to build a strong company rather than just focus on the quarterly bottom line.

So we have tenure to create a space in which remarkably talented scholars can look far down the road, take chances, and pursue bold avenues of research and scholarship. And history has demonstrated that, by and large, their risk-taking pays off, frequently in ways that we could not have foreseen when they first began their work.

The second reason that tenure is important is that it promotes good pedagogy. Tenure provides space within which professors can appropriately be expected to include students. It sets the expectation that we will not only teach as well as we possibly can but that we will also take time to introduce students to the satisfactions of research.

If our only motivation were the fastest route to the best result or the next publication, it is not clear that most of us would choose to have students involved in our work. Students need to be trained. They slow things down. They make mistakes. And yet we need to take the time to include them and mentor them if we are to have an appropriately long

time horizon, a time horizon that extends beyond our own productive lives in teaching, research and scholarship.

Finally, tenure nurtures academic creativity by providing a supportive environment in which creative work can take place. It says, “You have found your intellectual home. We want you to be here for a long, long time. You have something valuable to contribute here. We trust you to do it. We will do all we can to help you succeed.”

Academic creativity is a fragile thing. And I believe we should not underestimate the value of tenure in nurturing and sustaining the creativity that we all cherish.

I believe in tenure. I am grateful for tenure. But tenure raises the stakes for all of us, and so we must never take it for granted.