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UW System Faculty Supportive of Tenure, But See Deficiencies

University of Chicago Research Delves into Opinions of Tenured and Tenure-Track Professors

Eighty-nine percent of almost 1,400 members of the University of Wisconsin System faculty with tenure or on the tenure track say that if tenure were replaced with contracts, they would consider leaving for a college or university in another state, and a majority say they would be less likely to undertake ambitious research or discuss controversial topics, according to a survey by University of Chicago Professor William Howell.

But support for tenure in practice in specific schools and departments, opinions about how the process actually works and feedback on whether tenure is a good measure of quality vary widely:

- Overall, 65% strongly support the practice in the department in which they work, and another 25% somewhat support it. But support is much stronger among those who already have tenure. Among tenured faculty, 72% strongly support it; among those on the tenure track but who don't yet have it, 42% strongly support it.
- Slightly more than half of all respondents (51%) say the current post-tenure review process is largely a pro forma exercise that has little bearing on their professional activities. (Faculty at the four-year schools outside Milwaukee and Madison are the most critical of the post-tenure review process; faculty at the two-year colleges and the UW-Extension are the least critical). Forty-nine percent overall say the review process is a valuable check that ensures they remain productive and active contributors.
- Sixty-two percent of respondents think tenure is a good measure of instruction in the classroom most of the time or always.
- Seventy percent of respondents think it is a good indication of research achievements most of the time or always.

- Only 36% overall (31% at the Madison and Milwaukee campuses) think tenure is a good indication of impact on the community, business or economy most of the time or always.

“Part of the mission of our public universities is to promote economic well-being, to make sure the publicly supported expertise on our campuses is shared with business and industry and the rest of our Wisconsin community,” said WPRI President Mike Nichols. “As we’ve pointed out in prior research, this has to emanate from the faculty. Unfortunately, it looks like we have no good way of knowing if most of them are doing that part of their jobs.”

Professor Howell, himself a former professor at UW-Madison, had complete control over the design, distribution and analysis of the survey. He received funding for the project from WPRI.

“The WPRI Board decided to fund this research because our public university system — 26 different campuses and the Extension — is so essential to the success of Wisconsin’s students, taxpayers, businesses in need of talent and expertise and, indeed, our entire economy. The citizens of this state deserve to know as much as possible about how it operates,” said Nichols.

“One of the major concerns here is that the post-tenure review process is toothless in far too many places,” he added. “Just about everyone I know gets an in-depth performance review — with expectations and consequences. Hopefully, the Regents and chancellors will make sure the same thing starts happening in our universities.”

The governor and legislators recently removed tenure guarantees from state statute, effectively making tenure a policy issue under the control of the Board of Regents. The Regents, in turn, plan to adopt a new tenure policy by April 2016.

Professor Howell’s research — which was conducted with the review and approval of the University of Chicago Institutional Review Board and which went through the grant review process at the university — shows widespread concern over what the Regents might do. Throughout America, the number of tenured positions has decreased over time. Forty years ago, almost 80% of faculty / instructor positions at America’s colleges and universities were filled by professors with tenure or on the tenure track. Today, that figure is 33%.

In the UW System today, there are approximately 6,280 tenured and tenure-track faculty members (1,378 of whom completed surveys that were analyzed). There are also approximately 4,760 instructional staff (3,730 full-time equivalents) who are not eligible for tenure and were not part of the survey.

The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, established in 1987, is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit think tank governed by an independent board and working to engage Wisconsinites in discussions and timely action on key public policy issues critical to the state’s future.

All of Professor Howell’s research — including topline, crosstabs and a PowerPoint presentation — is available at www.wpri.org.