

Elon must establish a tenure policy

Editor of the Pendulum:

During the past decade the number of tenured faculty members at Elon College has declined steadily. At present, substantially fewer than one-third of all full-time teaching faculty are tenured--and almost no one at the college is on tenure-track.

It is critically important for education at Elon College that this situation be corrected, immediately. There are several reasons why tenure is essential for any college, and especially so at Elon.

First, the tenure system evolved in higher education to provide protection for the spirit of free inquiry and free expression which is essential for a vibrant, living, changing higher educational environment.

If a college faculty member actually is participating in and contributing to higher education, then that faculty member is dealing with material--perhaps in research, probably in meetings, necessarily in the classroom--that is at the cutting and often controversial edge of his/her discipline, and many of those controversies have political overtones.

Consider only a few contemporary examples: in economics, controversy concerning "supply-side" economics; in religion, disputes over liberation theology; in philosophy, fundamental disagreements on issues of social justice; in biology, controversy concerning genetic determinism (not to mention Darwinism).

In psychology, disputes over IQ testing; in art, controversy over "obscenity"; in literature, battles over the literacy canon; in business, questions about the ethical-social responsibility of corporate officers; in linguistics, battles over creative vs. behavioral accounts of language acquisition.

In history, controversial historical reconstructions and reinterpretations; in political science, disputes over competing political systems and analyses of Latin American governments; in sociology, studies of the causes of criminal behavior; in education, fundamental questions concerning the role of public schools in society; in the field of

computers, the debate over artificial intelligence.

The list could be expanded, and the examples multiplied. These are not "ivory tower" controversies, but issues that are debated in the media and in the political arena. A college faculty that takes seriously its role in exploring and examining and teaching current knowledge cannot avoid constantly engaging such issues.

If a college's faculty considers only those ideas that are well-established and noncontroversial, then that college is intellectually moribund. A college that has no need of tenure has failed as a college; an administrator who does not see the importance of the tenure system does not understand the function of a college, and does not understand the difference between higher education and technical instruction.

A second reason why tenure is essential is more practical. It is becoming more and more difficult to recruit outstanding faculty members to Elon College. The teaching load is heavy, other responsibility--advising, committee work--are substantial, and opportunities to read and study and do research and remain current in one's field are severely limited.

When recruitment is further hobbled by being unable to offer a tenure-track position, recruitment of high-quality faculty is difficult indeed. There are already cases of faculty members who left because they did not receive tenure-track appointments; there are many more cases of superb teachers who rejected an offer from Elon to accept a tenure-track position elsewhere.

Our recruitment efforts are hamstrung by what we have to offer: if we offer a fixed-term contract, which cannot be extended beyond six years, then potential faculty will obviously prefer the possibility of more permanent employment elsewhere.

But if instead we offer this bastard position of "permanent non-tenure," which is non-existent at better schools and is common only at the most backward and authoritarian

"The policy of hiring permanent nontenured faculty has already had some bad effects on Elon College, especially on faculty morale."

religious "colleges," then potential faculty are even more doubtful: such positions give the impression that the college is about to go belly up, and can't make any long-term commitments; or that the college prefers to have its faculty constantly vulnerable to being fired at the whim of some administrator.

Even if a potential faculty member is convinced of the integrity and good will of current administrators, there is always the question of what will happen when a new Dean, a new Chair, a new Vice-President, or a new President is appointed: thus "permanent" non-tenure appointments are seen--perhaps correctly--as even more tenuous and fraught with uncertainty than are the undesirable term contracts.

Over the past decade Elon College has managed to attract excellent faculty members even for such dubious "not-tenure" positions: it has been a buyer's market, and Elon has exploited that market shamelessly.

But that situation is changing rapidly. The best estimates indicate that within a decade there will be four college/university positions available for every three qualified individuals in the humanities and social sciences, while shortage in other disciplines may be even greater.

Forward-looking colleges are now "stockpiling" promising faculty members in preparation for the anticipated shortage. In contrast, the shortsighted Elon College policy of denying tenure-track appointments makes it more and more difficult for Elon College to compete.

The third reason that tenure is important is a simple matter of fairness. Elon makes much of faculty "commitment" to the college, and indeed the faculty do make a tremendous commitment of time, energy, and talent to providing a high quality classroom and research environment at the college.

But that commitment is grossly one-sided. Faculty are

being asked to commit their efforts, their skills, and their time to the well-being of Elon students and Elon College; but there is absolutely no reciprocal commitment from the college to these dedicated, nontenure track faculty members. They can be let go at any moment, for any--or no--reason.

If after a decade of dedicated work a faculty member "burns out" from the exhausting schedule of teaching, striving to stay current in his/her discipline, advising, committee meetings, then the faculty member can be conveniently cast aside, and another warm nontenure track body rolled in.

There cannot be one-sided commitment. If the college expects faculty to commit themselves to the well-being of Elon College and its students, then there should be a reciprocal tenure commitment: a commitment to that faculty member, a commitment to provide opportunities for renewal and continuing work in his/her area to keep the person intellectually alive and academically current.

Having a "permanently nontenured" category at a college where faculty are expected to teach nine courses every year, with no sabbaticals, and frequent classes of 40 students are more, certainly gives the impression that the college intends to wear these people out and then replace them.

Perhaps that is a false impression; if so, the college should be eager to correct it, by abolishing the category of permanent nontenure appointments.

Some have claimed that there should not be too many tenure track appointments, since they make it likely that departments will be "tenured-in," and not have any new individuals entering the department, and thus become stale. The argument is ludicrous.

In the first place a "permanent" nontenure position would hardly be the answer to that problem. If it is truly

permanent, then it will not avoid the supposed problem of "tenured-in" departments, since there will be no change of faculty--but only a change in the status of the permanent faculty. If instead the "permanent nontenured" person is to be fired in order to bring in a new person, then the "permanent" nontenure offer is a lie.

Even with every position being a tenure-track position, there is little chance that a department will become "tenured-in" for long periods; instead, the natural process of retirement results in sufficient turnover.

In any case, the notion that only through bringing in "new faculty" can a department stay current and fresh betrays the narrowest sort of exploitative thinking. If the college is to deserve the name "college," it must be committed to keeping all faculty--tenured and tenure-track, those who have taught for four years and those who have taught for forty--academically current and intellectually alive and interested in their disciplines.

If Elon College should ever reach the point at which new ideas and currency in the field can be achieved only through bringing in new faculty, and long-term faculty cannot stay current and alive and fresh for their full teaching careers at Elon College, then Elon College should close its doors: it would then be betraying its students, abusing its faculty, and failing its mission.

The policy of hiring permanent nontenured faculty has already had some bad effects on Elon College, especially on faculty morale. Fortunately, the problems are not irreversible, and the means for reversing the situation are readily at hand. The category of permanent nontenured faculty should be abolished, and all faculty now in that category should be given tenure or placed on tenure-track appointments.

Any "solution"--such as raising the percentage of tenured/tenure track faculty--which continues in any form this foul category of permanent nontenure appointments is academically, practically, and morally unacceptable.

Bruce Waller
Department of Philosophy