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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Why we should value the tenure system

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When a professor as distinguished as political economist Francis Fukuyama argues that the tenure system at American universities should be abolished, it pays for us to pay attention.

Most attacks on tenure and on the academic freedom that it is designed to guarantee come from the conservative side of the political spectrum, generally based on concerns about the damaging effects free-thinking professors have on students in the areas of traditional morals, religious beliefs and civic virtues.

Fukuyama, however, despite being a protégé of Paul Wolfowitz, presciently opposed the neoconservative Iraq war policy, which he called "utterly unrealistic in its overestimation of U.S. power." And last October in *Newsweek*, he offered a devastating critique of the Reagan and Bush economic policies of tax cuts and deregulation that he believes are "at the core of" our current economic crisis.

Fukuyama thinks that "the rationale for tenure," i.e., the need to protect academic freedom against powerful outsiders who have "tried to remove professors whose views they dislike," is still valid, and that "the intellectual freedom guaranteed by tenure is precious." But, as an economist, he argues that the cost of the tenure system is too high intellectually, and the freedom of thought it guarantees can be acquired in another market - think tanks.

In my opinion, Fukuyama has moved in Olympian realms too long and suffers from high-altitude bomber syndrome - an inability to see how the lofty proposals he is dropping on us play out on the ground.

Let's examine his idea that think tanks can provide havens for thinkers of politically or culturally controversial ideas. First, think tanks - with few exceptions like the New America Foundation to which Fukuyama belongs - are small partisan institutions where public intellectuals have their ideas reinforced by like-minded thinkers. If academic freedom is not guaranteed at our thousands of community and junior colleges, four-year colleges and research universities, public and private, even non-partisan or bipartisan think tanks will do us little good educationally.

Secondly, Fukuyama argues that the tenure system has made our educational institutions overly conservative. In his view, graduate students and assistant professors have to think in lockstep with their advisers and their senior faculty colleagues in order to advance. This stifles innovation and promotes group-think.

These tendencies do exist. But I can state categorically that in the many colleges and universities I have visited, I have seen widespread strong encouragement from senior faculty of young scholars and Ph.D. candidates with new ideas and new approaches, sometimes the very ideas and approaches that an educational world without tenure would not tolerate. Also it is hard to imagine that pressures to assimilate are not felt in think tanks, which lack the formal safeguards of extra-departmental and extra-institutional reviews when it comes to professional advancement.

Tenure is criticized for guaranteeing career-long employment to faculty members, a small percentage of whom become unproductive. But widespread systems of post-tenure review are correcting the problem of senior deadwood.

Moreover, the career-long security at a particular institution offered by tenure has several unacknowledged positive ramifications. It makes tenured faculty willing to put long hours into improving for the long haul what they rightly come to view as 'their' colleges and universities. This runs counter to what political economists like Fukuyama see as the harmful emphasis on short-term gains in American corporations and other institutions.

The ongoing major curricular reforms in undergraduate studies at the University of Texas have already taken seven years of study, planning, critiquing and first-stage implementation, beginning with the formation of the Commission of 125 in 2002. Like many other long-term changes, these improvements would have been unthinkable at an institution made of untenured careerist faculty members ready to spring off to the best job offers elsewhere and therefore unwilling to do hard work whose only reward is making the educational experience better for tens of thousands of young men and women of the state of Texas year after year.

The next time you run into tenured faculty members anywhere, thank them for their dedication to the future of our country.

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AFTERWORD (LEFT OUT FOR REASONS OF SPACE)

There is also another advantage of tenure, an economic one. At UT Austin long-term faculty tolerate salary compression, whereby starting salaries now for even junior professors exceed some senior salaries. The cost of hiring new professors also includes start up incentives (stipends for books, travel, graduate student support). Dedicated long-term tenured faculty accept less in the way of annual salary increases and incentives because they prize the stability in their home lives (families especially) and in their work situation.

Again I stress that I do not see why the 'conformist' mentality should be any less in a think tank where junior scholars are trying to impress powerful senior colleagues (for career considerations, even if not for 'tenure') than it is at colleges and universities that offer tenure.