

# The long game of tenure



In 2009, the American Association of University Professors underscored the importance of academic freedom in the light of *Garcetti v. Ceballos*<sup>1</sup> and stated that “The principal purpose of tenure is to safeguard academic freedom, which is necessary for all who teach and conduct research in higher education.” Nevertheless, the institution of tenure is coming under fire in many states across the United States. This trend is troubling as we firmly believe tenure is necessary for the success and well-being of the academic enterprise. We detail below two distinct yet complementary stories that highlight the value of tenure. Specifically, we describe how tenure enables faculty to speak openly about institutional matters and enables faculty to focus on long-term research.

## The faculty is the university (M.Y.V.)

Tenure safeguards academic freedom, which typically applies to scholars acting in an academic capacity – as teachers or researchers expressing strictly scholarly viewpoints. As the following story shows, scholars also have expertise in academic institutional matters, and academic freedom protects their ability to speak up on such matters.

To provide some context, I have since 2019 held the position of university professor at Rice University, where I have spent my entire academic career. I never went through the conventional academic promotion and tenure process. After a few years as a postdoctoral scholar at Stanford, I spent close to a decade as a researcher at IBM Research. In the early 1990s, I decided to move to academia, and Rice hired me as a full professor with a named chair, and as computer science department chair. Behind the scenes, my appointment had to be approved by Rice’s Faculty Promotion and Tenure Committee, but I was barely aware of that process. For the next 15 years, my involvement with the tenure process was with evaluations of assistant and associate professors for their research, teaching and service contributions and assessments of whether they should be promoted and, in the case of assistant professors, given tenure or be denied promotion. I saw tenure as a quality-control gate and as protection of academic freedom, and I saw academic freedom mostly as the freedom of faculty members to self-direct their teaching and research.

My perspective changed dramatically following the 2008–2009 financial crisis, when Baylor College of Medicine (BCM) entered into merger negotiations with Rice. Rice, like practically all academic institutions, was adversely affected by the crisis, but its relatively large endowment shielded it from grave adverse consequences, unlike BCM. In November 2008, Rice’s president invited me to join a faculty advisory committee to advise him on the prospective Rice–BCM merger; I accepted the invitation without hesitation. After a couple of meetings of the committee, however, I realized that there was no real interest in the opinions of Rice’s faculty.

Until that point, I had yet to form an opinion on the merits of the merger proposal, but I had a firm belief that a university’s faculty have a right and a responsibility to express their collective opinion on institutional matters, as their collective wisdom is a tremendous institutional resource. As the faculty began to look closely at pros and cons of the proposed merger, I became more and more skeptical of the proposal. To promote a healthy debate on these matters, I gave a public lecture at Rice entitled “The whole may be less than the sum of the parts,” in which I argued that the potential benefits of the merger had been overplayed while the risks had been underplayed<sup>2</sup>. Rice eventually terminated merger negotiations in early 2010.

From this experience, I learned how tenure is necessary to protect academic freedom – specifically, the freedom to speak up on institutional matters. In an era of corporatized higher education, where many colleges and universities are focusing on the pursuit of money and prestige, the old adage “the faculty is the university” is more important than ever, but it cannot survive without tenure. Paraphrasing Justice Brennan in *New York Times v. Sullivan*, discussions on academic institutional matters should be uninhibited, robust and wide open. Yet, without the protection of tenure, I would probably not have had the courage to rise up in such public opposition to the university president.

## The value of tenure through the lens of the journey and destination (T.J.T.)

I echo my colleague M.Y.V.’s sentiment that “the university is the faculty,” and it gives me pride

to say that I am now one of those faculty for the long term. After a 20-year-long academic trek toward tenure, I am a tenured associate professor at Rice University. My perspective on the long-term value of tenure is largely formed by my journey through academia up to this point, from my experience in industry, to PhD student in Spain, to postdoctoral scientist in France and the United States, and as both non-tenure-track and tenure-track faculty member. This heterogeneous set of experiences left me with clear view of the benefits of tenure in academia, through the lens of the journey and destination.

How did I get here? While my goal was to pursue a career path in academia, my academic voyage was filled with numerous twists and turns. To start, I decided to pursue a PhD at the Polytechnic University of Catalonia, Barcelona, Spain, focusing on the emerging computational biology and bioinformatics field. After successfully defending my PhD in 2008, I lived on year-to-year contracts for the next five years. Despite what felt like ideal circumstances for a postdoctoral scientist, such as supportive mentors, great research projects and wonderful universities (Institut Pasteur in Paris, University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins), the weight of an uncertain future, temporary contracts, and lack of commitment from any institution occupied much of my headspace. Even as I grew as a scientist, my mindset concentrated on delivering results instead of focusing on big-picture scientific questions and research focused on societal benefit, and I often wondered whether there was a future for me in academia.

After a few years outside academia, I was fortunate to land back at the University of Maryland with a supportive mentor in a non-tenure-track research position, with the mindset that this was likely my last chance to pursue my academic career goal. I was not sure whether my window of opportunity to pursue a tenure-track position had already closed.

Right when I felt like I had exhausted all my opportunities and the time had arrived to abandon my dream of a tenured position, two of my closest mentors sat down with me and gave me a strong confidence boost, telling me that I belonged in academia and was ready. These impactful words rekindled

my passion for the destination and made me deeply appreciate the journey I had just taken. I proceeded to apply for several tenure-track positions. After a busy interview season, the long-awaited moment finally arrived. No fewer than 15 years after starting my trek toward tenure, one pandemic, two continents, three countries, five languages, seven cities, eight institutions and uncountable hurdles later, I received an offer to lead an independent research group as a tenure-track assistant professor in the computer science department at Rice University.

As someone who just achieved this milestone and someone who took years to get to this point, what do I view as the value of tenure? The first thought that came to mind was profound: I finally had professional stability after two decades of instability. Next, I felt enormous gratitude toward my family members, students, mentors, colleagues and friends, as I could not have done this without them and without their support. Finally, I was elated that I was now enabled – in fact, encouraged – to pursue creative and ambitious and risky research endeavors with a long-horizon instead of focusing on month-to-month and year-to-year goals.

Why this is important? One clear recent example is the important research into the origins of COVID-19, which became politically charged and resulted in harassment of the scientists pursuing it<sup>3</sup>. Following unconventional research directions in pursuit of “contributions for the betterment of the world”<sup>4</sup> necessarily involves risky, winding research journeys with unclear outcomes. But these winding journeys are 100% necessary to identify the unbeaten paths that lead to novel research directions and breakthroughs. Tenure is also significant for academics to be able to openly discuss topics such as diversity, equity and inclusion; ethics; the impact of our work on climate and the environment; and increasing the representation of underrepresented groups in academia. A tenured faculty member who is passionate about these issues and wants to contribute can do so without fear of backlash from the university.

Receiving tenure made me reflect profoundly on the cost of not having tenure in academia. While I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to work with supportive

faculty at excellent institutions, there was a nontrivial cost of my career path over the years. Over the past two decades it was difficult to describe to others my long-term plan and professional situation, apart from the scientific questions I was pursuing at a given moment. I had to regularly reflect on whether I was on the right career path, which generated anxiety and self doubt. Living off year-to-year contracts on modest pay limited my ability for long-term financial planning and made most significant purchases (home, car) seem risky. Multiple years in a ‘temporary’ position had a significant effect on my emotional wellbeing over the years. Reaching the major milestone of tenure in my career has alleviated these concerns. I look forward to paying this forward to those embarking on journeys of their own and to positively impacting the community at Rice and beyond.

## Concluding remarks

While it may seem from those external to academia as unnecessary, we hope that both stories provide perspective into the need for tenure in academia. While we both speak as engineers, tenure is even more crucial in the humanities and social sciences, such as in political science and history. Discussing controversial topics in the classroom or research papers is the norm, not the exception, and as such professors in these areas are more exposed to potential retribution<sup>5</sup>.

In our first story, we highlight the value of tenure for protecting the freedom to speak up on institutional matters without fear of backlash. We include this story to highlight that an alternative to tenure, a fixed-interval review process, would significantly weaken the ability of a professor in academia to speak up on institutional matters, some of which may have a profound effect on the stability and well-being of all members of an academic community. In the second story, we underscore the value of tenure for emotional health and freedom to pursue innovative, nontraditional research programs. The value of these research directions cannot be seen on short time scales of five to ten years; it is important to look at the ‘long game of tenure’.

That being said, there are several related questions that are important to collectively discuss as a community to increase inclusivity and promote accountability today.

- What are the key factors in the tenure system that should be improved to enhance diversity and promote the inclusion of underrepresented groups in academia?
- How can we better encourage and support our colleagues across all career stages and situations (for example, PhD students, non-tenure-track scientists and untenured tenure-track professors)?
- How can we better infuse accountability while maintaining the required academic freedoms echoed by both stories?

Tenure is a social institution and, as such, an imperfect institution. We emphasize that we should continually seek to address these imperfections, and we feel that tenure provides a safeguard for academic freedom that will enable us to do so.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.