

Ohio State president rethinks tenure

Higher ed | Gordon Gee says professors should be judged on the quality of their work

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The leader of the country's largest university says it's time to re-examine how professors are awarded tenure, a type of job-for-life protection virtually unknown outside academia.

Ohio State University President Gordon Gee says the traditional formula that rewards publishing in scholarly journals over excellence in teaching and other contributions is outdated and too often favors the quantity of a professor's output over quality.

"Someone should gain recognition at the university for writing the great American novel or for discovering the cure for cancer," he told The Associated Press. "In a very complex world, you can no longer expect everyone to be great at everything."

Plenty of people have raised the issue over the years, but Gee is one of the few U.S. college presidents with the reputation and political prowess — not to mention the golden touch at fundraising — who might be able to begin the transformation.

Still, some professors are already skeptical.

"The idea of awarding tenure based on teaching makes me anxious," said Jennifer Higginbotham, an English professor at Ohio State who's up for tenure in three years. By then, she will need to publish a book she's writing about conceptions of girlhood in the Middle Ages to have any chance at the promotion.

"There's a feeling, I think, that good teachers are a dime a dozen," said Higginbotham, 32. "I'm not sure what you'd have to do to distinguish yourself enough as a teacher to get tenure."

Tenure, which makes firing and other discipline difficult if

Tenure at PSU

Portland State University follows traditional procedures in relying on faculty committees, department chairs, deans, the provost and president to decide whether a professor deserves tenure. Where it differs is in the criteria all of those people use for making tenure decisions. Since 1996, the university has followed recommendations of the late Ernest Boyer, former chancellor of New York's public university system and a leader in higher education reform.

PSU judges professors for tenure more on the meaning and quality of their work than

the quantity. Professors are evaluated on their scholarship contributions in research, teaching and community outreach. They also are judged on how their work explains and interprets their research, provides discoveries and insights, connects knowledge across disciplines and applies to real-world problems.

In other words, tenured professors are expected to make their mark in the classroom, the academy and the community.

— Bill Graves

not impossible, can seem ridiculously generous to outsiders. But the job protection gives professors the freedom to express ideas and conduct studies without fear of reprisal.

Tenure review, which took its current form in the 1940s, typically emphasizes publications over teaching and sometimes weighs whether a professor brings in research grants. Besides job protection, tenure also figures into salaries. A full professor with tenure at Ohio State earns about \$126,000 annually.

The late Ernest Boyer, a former chancellor of New York's state university system, raised some of the same issues in his groundbreaking 1990 book, "Reconsidering Scholarship."

A few universities have taken steps toward Boyer's model, including Portland State University and Western Carolina University.

Gee is not yet giving specific examples of how a reformed tenure system would work. In order to make sweeping changes, he would need cooperation from faculty and administrators across the university system.

The pressure to get tenure is greater as universities rely more on part-time faculty and non-tenure track professors. While the number of tenure track positions grew by 7 percent from 1975 to 2007, the number of nontenure track jobs more than tripled, according to the American Association of University Professors.