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BALANCING ACT

Is Tenure a Trap for Women?

Not if the tenure system is adapted to suit the modern realities of professors' lives.

By [MARY ANN MASON](#)

The fear of failure influences many female academics to delay starting a family until after they have earned tenure. That same fear influences other women to avoid the tenure track entirely and decide that they must choose family over career. Shirley M. Tilghman, the first woman to be president of Princeton University, famously argued that the tenure system should be dropped because it is "no friend to women." She pointed out that it makes huge demands at a time when women are already stressed out with young families.

Even members of Congress are focusing on the problem. Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, a Texas Democrat and senior member of the House Science Committee, has introduced legislation that would, among other reforms, stop the university tenure clock for scientists with newborn responsibilities. "Federal policy makers must be more proactive in stopping the leaky pipeline that results in women departing at every major transition point while pursuing careers in engineering, physics, technology, and related fields," she said.

Would women be better off without a 19th-century career model that was conceived when only men were professors and their stay-at-home wives cared for the children?

Certainly the timing of tenure is terrible for women. Today, the average age at which women can expect to receive a Ph.D. is 34. That puts the five to seven years of racing the tenure clock squarely at the end of the normal reproductive cycle. Those are the "make or break" years for female academics, in terms of both career and childbearing, not to mention the demands of raising young children. Difficult choices must be made.

How would the academic world work without a tenure system? Unfortunately, we don't have to fantasize to envision that alternate world. It is with us now, growing rapidly, and supported largely on the backs on women with children. A 30-year trend has relentlessly reduced the centrality of tenure in higher education. Full timers who were either tenured or on the tenure track made up 55 percent of the faculty in 1970, 1975, and 1980, but then

declined to 41 percent in 2003. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, tenured and tenure-track academics composed only 31 percent of all faculty members in 2007, while 49 percent worked part time and 12 percent were non-tenure-track full timers.

Tenure is fast fading away in favor of a leaner, meaner business model that makes use of low-paid instructors who work part time, often without benefits. It is happening at both public and private institutions and at all levels of higher education, from research universities to community colleges. It is not a fluke that that 30-year trend coincides with the incredible rise of women in doctoral education. Women now receive about half of all Ph.D's awarded in the United States, providing half of the available labor force. Because of caregiving responsibilities or geographical restraints imposed by being part of dual-career couples, many women are often willing to serve in a part-time role, providing the labor for this new business model.

Our research at the Berkeley Law Center on Health, Economic & Family Security shows that women with children across all disciplines are twice as likely as men with children to work in part-time or non-tenure-track positions. Many women (and some men) take part-time jobs because they don't think they can handle a demanding full-time, tenure-track post during the early years of raising children. Some expect to eventually switch to the tenure track. They may not be so concerned about the low pay and marginalization of being an adjunct if they believe it is a temporary phase, which will end once the children are older. Regrettably, they rarely get the opportunity to seek tenure.

Leslie, a Ph.D. I interviewed for my book, *Mothers on the Fast Track*, has spent her career teaching at the same university as a lecturer. "The majority of part timers are women and ... their job is very insecure and very uncomfortable," she said. "One part timer just retired because after 20 years of teaching, the schedule came out and her name just was not there. No one talked to her or discussed anything. ... It is very clear to many of us part-time people in the academic system that it is not a good route to a tenure-track position."

So you have a system in which a large portion of the labor pool cannot handle the front-end demands of the tenure system, as it exists, but ultimately feel abused by a dead-end, part-time career path. There must be a compromise position, and, in fact, some universities are thinking innovatively about the problem.

Most universities provide some relief in the form of policies to stop the tenure clock for childbirth. Although that is a welcome measure, our research has found that it is not used unless it is an entitlement (rather than something you receive by special request); it is available to fathers, and used by them as well; and it is supported and enforced by the campus culture. The same cultural support and enforcement is necessary to promote paid childbirth leaves and relief from teaching. In our 2003 study of faculty members at the University of California system, 51 percent of eligible mothers said they did not use the teaching-relief policy "because it might have hurt my chances for tenure or promotion."

Bolder policies include a part-time tenure track or a tenure track that allows people to switch from part-time to full-time status, depending on their family circumstances. Again, in our survey of California faculty members, we found wide support, among men and women of all ages, for allowing faculty members to shift at times to part-time status. For younger faculty members, it was child-care needs that prompted such great interest, and for older faculty members it was elder-care responsibilities (for a spouse or parent) and their own physical disabilities. A few universities, including the University of California, now have formal policies endorsing some form of a part-time tenure track. Yet despite the great demand for such policies, they remain relatively uncommon in academe.

Other important reforms would include:

- a formal policy that invited part-time faculty members to apply for full-time, tenure-track positions as they open;
- a policy that encouraged hiring committees to discount CV gaps when considering applicants who are parents.

A university without tenure would not allow the creative, challenging environment in which discovery and scholarship flourish. It would be, instead, a corporation staffed by part-time and contingent employees who could be hired or fired at the will and whim of the full-time corporate administrators. That would be a loss for students, for faculty members, and for the future of knowledge and innovation.

The tenure system, for all its faults, must be promoted, not extinguished. But it must be made more flexible to level the playing field and suit the modern realities of professors' lives.

Mary Ann Mason is a professor and co-director of the Berkeley Law Center on Health, Economic & Family Security and the author (with her daughter, Eve Ekman), of Mothers on the Fast Track. She writes regularly on work and family issues for our Balancing Act column, and invites readers to send in questions or personal concerns about those issues. She will answer your questions in a future column. E-mail your comments to careers@chronicle.com or to mamason@law.berkeley.edu. To read previous Balancing Act columns, see http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/balancing_act.

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