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Representing
Wayne State University
Faculty and Academic
Staff

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Ending Tenure and the Academic Freedom That it Guarantees at Wayne State University: The Consequences

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The Administration has made a formal proposal to the Union representing Faculty and Academic Staff at Wayne State University that would end tenure for Faculty, and job security (Employment Security Status [ESS]) for Academic Staff, and would provide several new grounds for firing Faculty and Academic Staff, including what is inarticulately referred to as “financially based reduction in force.” The Administration already has the power to fire Faculty and Academic Staff in the face of an economic emergency. What it apparently wants is the authority to fire people if it chooses to spend money to advance some agenda that it considers more important than retaining Faculty and Academic Staff, even if these people are performing their jobs at least adequately, and perhaps, very well or even brilliantly.

From the Administration’s perspective, this proposal might be characterized as a dispute between the Union and the Administration over the terms and conditions of employment. Such disputes, the Administration may believe, are properly resolved at the bargaining table. If that is the Administration’s view, it has missed the forest for the trees.

In fact, the Administration’s attack on tenure is an attack on the idea of a university, as that idea has been developed and nurtured over hundreds of years. The attack represents an attempt to convert the University from an institution in which the teachers and

researchers are central, to a university based on a corporate model where administrators run all aspects of the institution and the Faculty are mere employees. This proposal will be viewed by the outside world as an assault on the traditional idea of a university, and the response from the academic community within and without the University will be commensurate with the gravity of that assault. In brief, the Administration will soon find that it is not simply bargaining with the University’s Union. It has engaged itself in a major dispute with the entire academic community that it ultimately cannot win, and that will do serious harm to the University due to the highly negative responses its actions will provoke.

With the Administration’s proposal it is easy to inflame academic opinion on this issue, both at Wayne and with those at other institutions. It might be noted, for example, that a tenured Faculty member, who had proved his or her worth as a scholar by going through a rigorous tenure process, getting a 2/3rds vote of a series of sequential committees, culminating in the grant of tenure by the President and the Board of Governors, could be fired under the Administration’s proposal because some administrator who has never made a research grant proposal and could not write a scholarly article if his or her life depended on it has somehow concluded that the tenured Faculty member’s scholarly research is not up to his or her professional standards.

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Professional standards! That is, the standards set and currently maintained by qualified professionals, also known as tenured Faculty members. It would also be noted that the Administration would be free to fire Faculty members with tenure and with a binding employment contract who admittedly are performing at an exceptionally high standard if the Administration were to decide that the University was facing a financial problem, even if that problem was caused by giving huge raises to underperforming administrators. Under the rules today, the Board of Governors would have to declare a financial exigency to do this. Under the Administration's proposal, all that would have to be done is to change the budget internally.

There is no need, obviously, to go out of one's way to inflame the situation. Anyone in the University community can read the proposal for himself or herself and draw their own conclusions. The Administration, plain and simple, has made a proposal that would spell the end of the University's pretensions as a major research institution. The proposal itself will do significant harm to the University once its terms are well publicized. The academic community does not look kindly on universities that tear at the edges of the basic guarantee of tenure. A frontal attack on tenure, if successful, is a death sentence for any serious research university.

What happens to a university that shows contempt for basic academic values by eliminating tenure? We do not know for sure, for no serious research institution has ever gone down that path. But it is not difficult to predict what is likely to happen. First, the University almost immediately would lose the ability to attract highly qualified new Faculty. Why would a highly recruited scholar pick a University that has taken tenure, with its guarantee of academic freedom, away from its Faculty when all of its other employment options come with a guarantee of tenure or of the possibility of achieving tenure? Tenure really matters. Few faculty members take it lightly. Few if any would fail to view negatively a university

that had abolished it.

Second, the elimination of tenure by a university almost certainly would trigger an exodus of its existing Faculty, first with the best and the brightest, followed by any other Faculty members who could find a home that is more congenial to basic academic values. Yes, some older Faculty may find difficulty in moving, despite a solid or even outstanding resume. Young Faculty with fairly ordinary or weak resumes may stay, or they may move into Administration. But the University would be harmed irretrievably by the loss of well-qualified Faculty.

Of course, a university that abolished tenure would almost certainly reinstate tenure, once the harm became obvious to the old administrators or to the administrators who would replace them. Reinstating tenure, however, would not put the university back where it was. Its reputation for academic excellence, the defense of academic freedom and for support of core academic values would be in tatters. Faculty members who had remained at the university would not forget easily what had happened to their job security-- a job security they had paid for dearly in many cases by accepting below-market wages for many years. Prospective Faculty members would worry that a university willing to end tenure once might well do so again. A reputation as a serious research university, once lost, is not easily regained. And that loss, as noted above, is essentially a death sentence, not for Wayne State, which might limp along in some form, but for that university as a major center of learning.

If I were advising the Administration, which I'm not, I would tell the President and the Board of Governors to deep six this proposal as soon as possible, before it goes viral on the Internet. And I would suggest that the Administration remove from the negotiating process anyone whose fingerprints can be found on this proposal. I am really, really sure that this advice is really, really good. I fear, however, that the Administration is not seeking good advice and that the members of the Board of Governors have been kept in the dark about a proposal that can only bring grave harm to the University they are charged with leading and protecting.