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BALANCING ACT

Rethinking the Tenure Clock

Dealing with the rigidities of the tenure system is a key reform facing academe, if we want tenure to persist

By [MARY ANN MASON](#)

I received many reactions and personal stories from readers in response to my April column, ["Is Tenure a Trap for Women?"](#) In pulling together their many different stories, I found that readers were mostly urging a rethinking of the inflexible tenure clock at two particular points.

For both mothers and fathers, but mostly for mothers, academe insists on an incredibly intense push for productivity during the "make or break," assistant-professor years — roughly ages 33 to 40, the same years during which women are likely to have children. That frightens some top scholars away from a tenure-track job and defeats others who attempt it. The prospects are even more grim for those who take time away from academe to raise their children and later try to compete for an entry-level position.

The productive career of a faculty member spans three to four decades, but we currently require a rigid linear career march with no irregularities or time out.

Ann, a young mother who is struggling with the tenure clock in the social sciences, wrote, "There should be a recognition of the reasons for work slowdowns as well as time off. My publications were infrequent right after I received my Ph.D. (from a major university), even though I was working, because that's when my kids were young. As my kids get older, my publications are increasing. I'm hoping that future employers will realize that my more recent publications are what I can do."

For the older group (most in their 40s) who either left academe for a few years, taught part time until their children were a little older, or postponed their graduate studies until later in their children's lives, the possibilities of re-entering the tenure race at all are disheartening.

Older applicants who have not followed a rigid, unbroken academic career have a difficult time just getting an interview. Marion, a Ph.D. with impressive credentials wrote, "I went to graduate school in my 40s. What I found is that the tenure system works against older women in a particular way. My job-market experience was five years of solid discouragement. Out of dozens of letters sent, I got precisely one response that was not a rejection. My cover letter and CV have been tweaked over and over by my very savvy advisers. My thesis adviser is now president of [a major Ivy League university] so I wasn't exactly laboring in obscurity; I had a contract for a book from a big press; etc."

I have argued that the solution to the tenure trap is not to abolish tenure — and thereby increase the trend toward ever more part-time and contingent faculty members, to the detriment of students and scholarship. Instead, we should reform the ancient procedure to create a flexible tenure clock for a new population of Ph.D's, half of whom are women, and most of whom are parents who are seriously engaged, for a period in their lives, in the business of raising children.

Several reforms could make an incredible difference, including a part-time tenure track. That is not a new idea, and according to a [1994 article](#) in *The Chronicle*, there were already many universities then who had such a policy on their books. At that time, Kathleen Christensen of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation claimed these policies were unusable, "because a culture of long work hours and [a focus on] speed to tenure meant that the part timer was seen as working in a deviant fashion."

It is a very long stretch between adopting a written policy and having it actively used and supported by the internal culture. In 2001, when we began to explore serious reform of the University of California's policies and behaviors toward parents, we were surprised to discover a vague policy on the books for a part-time tenure track.

That policy was news to every faculty member we interviewed, and to most of the personnel staff members as well. On further investigation we were again surprised to learn that many faculty members were already on a part-time tenure track. They were, mainly, engineers and scientists who used the flexibility offered to do consulting work, or, in some cases, to start their own companies. All of those arrangements, including extended leaves, had been privately negotiated with department chairs and only involved faculty members who already had tenure.

That same year we surveyed faculty members in the University of California system and found that more than 60 percent of women and a third of men were interested in a flexible, prorated tenure track that would allow them to return to work full time at some point. Women were in favor of the policy mainly as a way of balancing their work with the obligations of raising small children, but both men and women mentioned elder care (of one's parents or spouse), and phasing into retirement, as important reasons why they supported a more flexible tenure track.

The "right to return" to full-time work is the key for part-time tenure tracks. A permanent part-time track may work for some faculty members, but for most people, it means

permanent marginalization in their departments. The vague policy that was already on the books at our university did not clearly include the right to return. Starting from scratch we attempted to craft a policy that would work for people's family obligations at any point in their careers.

The devil was, as always, in the details. Ten campuses and the systemwide academic senate all had to agree to the policy. The concerns mostly focused on how to assess the productivity of a part-time, pre-tenure career and, to a lesser extent, on evaluation of the regular merit reviews throughout a career. In drafting the policy, we had to choose between two options: preserving the traditional six-year span of the tenure track but adjusting the tenure standards for part timers, or maintaining the standards and lengthening the time allowed. Ultimately, we could reach faculty agreement only on lengthening the time, not on adjusting the standards.

We also butted against a firm governing-board policy that allowed no more than 10 years to elapse before a tenure vote. Even the restricted plan we came up with took two years to pass through the many levels of faculty governance and university bureaucracy.

The jury is still out since the policy only became available in late 2007. At that time, one mother, a professor of history, told me, "I'm so glad you are doing this, but I could never have used it. I couldn't have afforded to receive half-pay." However, many of the other new reforms we adopted to ameliorate the inflexible tenure clock — such as offering two semesters free from teaching for mothers and one for fathers (at full pay), and a default stopping of the clock for both mothers and fathers — appear to have made robust progress.

The second major inflexibility of the tenure clock is the problem facing Marion, the older Ph.D. seeking an entry-level appointment. How does a woman who completes her graduate training later in life, or who has taken time off to raise children and returns to academe several years later, receive fair consideration rather than a standard boilerplate rejection?

The problems facing older applicants applying for tenure-track positions have received less attention in our work-life debates. The training and talents of those candidates are often dismissed; they simply do not fit the age model of a thirty-something, freshly minted Ph.D. or postdoc.

However, a few good models do exist in the United States for dealing with re-entry or late entry into the work force. Some federal agencies and foundations offer re-entry postdocs to scientists, but normally those positions are meant to encourage people to switch into fields with a need for personnel, like biomedical research.

European countries have given re-entry more thought, partly because their demographics are even more worrisome than the United States'. According to the European Commission's *She Figures 2006*, women earn 43 percent of Europe's doctoral degrees in science but hold only 15 percent of senior academic positions. Many postdoctoral

fellowships in Europe include child-care and domestic-health supplements, and some focus on candidates who have taken a break from academe for family reasons. For example, the Wellcome Trust in Britain provides a two-to-four-year fellowship "for postdoctoral scientists returning to a scientific research career after a break of at least two years for family commitments."

The re-entry fellowships do not directly confront the problem of age discrimination in hiring, which Marion faced. She is up-to-date in her scholarship and a recent Ph.D., but the door is closed. Although we have age-discrimination laws in the United States, they are difficult to enforce in hiring since that is almost never the reason given for a rejection. Perhaps the solution is applying internal pressure on hiring committees to consider the CV's of older candidates.

Dealing with the problems created by a rigid tenure clock is a major area of reform facing academe. But it is reform that must occur if we want the benefits of tenure, a cornerstone of higher education, to persist.

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