We are hearing more and more discussion within the academy on the topic of post-tenure review. This phenomenon is usually defined as a comprehensive process involving peer review designed to assess performance and nurture faculty development. The process generally requires that improvement occur if deficiencies are found and mandates sanctions if the improvement plan is not accomplished. The soaring interest in post-tenure review seems to be driven by demands from legislators, boards of trustees, and tax payers for increased accountability by faculty and academic administrators. The continuous quality improvement movement, the need for increased flexibility within academic institutions, and the need to maintain the career vitality of senior faculty reinforce the calls for post-tenure review. These debates are often heated and emotional and colored by fear, anger, misinformation, and distrust.

Critics claim that post-tenure review will diminish faculty morale, threaten academic freedom, and distract faculty from important work. Advocates argue that the more we resist accountability, the more foolish, even irrelevant, we become, and that such a system can enhance career energy and assist faculty in developing professionally as technology, pedagogy, and institutional organizational structures change. Fuel is added to the national debate by the fact that the public and most legislators do not understand the nature of tenure or the demands of faculty life.

Christine M. Licata, the associate dean for academic affairs at the Rochester Institute of Technology/National Technical Institute for the Deaf, reviewed in detail more than 100 post-tenure review policies and related reports(1). Based on these data, she was able to define a few trends and issues. Post-tenure review is currently in the exploration or implementation stage at institutions in more than 30 states. Most such policies require a review of all tenured faculty at five- to seven-year intervals, while some require a review of selected faculty, in response to some event, such as unsatisfactory annual performance assessment. Almost all post-tenure review policies developed in recent years emphasize faculty development as a goal, and consequences (e.g., reward or remediation) are mandated.

Some faculty fear that post-tenure reviews may be used capriciously or unfairly by administrators to eliminate nonconforming faculty from the ranks. The American Association of University Professors states that summative reviews alter and diminish the due process inherent in academic freedom, allowing for easing of standards for dismissal. Summative reviews are those where consequences from the review are made explicit, and may include such things as preparation of a faculty development plan, reward measures, and development of an improvement plan when deficiencies are found. Interestingly, Christine Des Jarlais and Melinda Wood of the University of Hawaii reported that of the 1,079 reviews done at their institution over a 10-year period, deficiencies were found in only eight percent of cases, and no one was dismissed(1).

Institutions with successful post-tenure review policies in place underscore the importance of faculty and administrators working in a true collaboration to design the policy. They further emphasize the importance of protecting academic freedom, that the process be decentralized (i.e., individualized in the academic unit) and flexible, that local units establish clear standards for satisfactory performance, and that peers have a vital role in the review(1). Challenges to development of an effective post-tenure review policy include faculty resistance, additional time required to carry out the process, inconsistency in application of criteria between units within an institution, and lack of data on policy effectiveness.

The current national debate is often unproductive and will continue to be so as long as discussion remains replete with unsubstantiated claims about the benefits and consequences. Additional data must be collected to elucidate the actual impact and outcomes of post-tenure review. Support must be made available for demonstration projects to explore practical approaches to implementation of post-tenure review. Campuses need technical assistance and consultation as they evaluate the implications of post-tenure review for their own institutions. Such support is increasingly available from the American Association of Higher Education. Additional research will soon define the outcomes of post-tenure review, in particular with regard to impacts on teaching, research, and service and will clarify the contribution of such policies to maintaining the vitality of senior faculty.

What is clear at present is that this is a debate that will not go away in the near future. The discourse must be broadened and enhanced with real data. If the debate is approached with negativism, misinformation, and closed minds, legislators and tax payers will incorrectly conclude that academic ranks are filled with nonperformers bent on self-protection from the accountability demanded of other sectors of American life.

Reference