I’ve been discussing what a university professor does with his or her time, and have devoted a couple of posts to the question of what it takes to receive tenure. In doing so I have indicated that tenure is a guarantee of life-long employment by the academic institution, barring such extraordinary circumstances as moral turpitude on the part of the professor (it happens!) and financial exigency of the institution (it too, alas, happens).

I should say as well, though, that once one receives tenure it is no pure boondoggle for the rest of one’s life. At UNC, at least, we have a mandatory “Post-tenure Review” process every five years, where we who have tenure have to explain in writing what we have been doing in our teaching, research, and service since the previous review. If performance is not satisfactory, a plan of remedial action is implemented, and if things go from bad to worse, disciplinary actions can be implemented. But for most of us, we’re working our tails off all the time anyway, so there’s not a problem. I was at a social event at a friend’s house and a colleague from the Department of Religious Studies at Duke told me that earlier that day she had been praising flexibility in our time schedules that we have as university professors. As she put it, “We can work any 70 hours of the week that we choose!”

But why have tenure at all? Isn’t it a fairly ridiculous system, providing a life-long guarantee of a job? No one else gets this, in any other profession. Why should university professors get it? Isn’t it an outdated institution that leads to enormous abuse, counter-productively leading to the minimizing of effort by those who know they can’t get fired? Doesn’t it run completely counter to the principles of the free market that promote incentives and competition?

Speaking as someone who has been within the university system for a long time – thirty years now! – I have to say that I think that higher education is indeed an exceptional world (meaning it is unlike every other occupation/career/line of work that people engage in) and that the very nature of the enterprise *requires* the tenure system. Without it, we would be sunk.

And here’s why.

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