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ILR Impact Brief - Faculty Tenure and  
the Gap between Policy and Practice

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# IMPACT BRIEF

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## Faculty Tenure and the Gap between Policy and Practice

**Research question:** What factors influence the use of tenure systems for faculty employment in colleges and universities?

**Conclusion:** Almost all four-year institutions of higher education have adopted the tenure system as a formal policy for faculty employment. The degree to which tenure systems are actually implemented, however, depends on resource flows and institutional pressures. Fewer resource constraints (i.e., greater per-student revenues and larger endowments) increase the proportion of professors employed on tenure-track lines; likewise, a stronger research orientation positively affects the share of faculty in tenure-track slots. Colleges and universities that rely more heavily on tuition for revenues and those with larger numbers of accreditations (from professional and occupational associations) generally employ fewer tenure-track professors. Other variables also matter: Tenure is more prevalent at public, older, and more complex universities and colleges and is less widespread among institutions that enroll larger numbers of students and among those that include a medical school. And finally, the share of tenure-track faculty declines on campuses with a larger pool of graduate students who are available to teach.

**Workplace impact:** The hiring of temporary and contract workers is increasing in many professional occupations. Understanding the forces that shape academic insti-

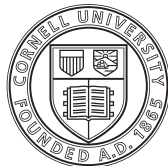
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tutions' implementation of tenure systems provides insight into the conditions that affect the ability of professions, in general, to shape employment practices in their fields. The research here also begins to explain why organizations may only partially put into practice the policies and systems they have formally adopted. A combination of resource constraints that raise the costs of implementation plus ambiguities about how and when to actualize tenure (or family leave, flextime, continuing education, and the like) tend to reduce the use of these policies.

**Abstract:** Tenure is an institution within American higher education that dates back to the formation of the American Association of University Professors in 1913. The group's original goal was to develop principles and policies concerning both faculty terminations and investigations into alleged violations of academic freedom. A series of position papers issued by the association over the next 30 years gradually laid out the rationale for, and structure of, the contemporary tenure system. The issue of non-tenure-track, limited-term appointments surfaced in a set of regulations published in 1956, although the proportion of a school's faculty that could legitimately be hired under this arrangement was left ambiguous.

The years following World War II were boom times for colleges and universities. With more young people seeking college degrees and more government support for higher education, colleges and universities easily abided by the association's tenure guidelines and ignored the uncertainties surrounding non-tenure-track positions. By the mid-1980s, according to national surveys, 98% of



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four-year schools had adopted the tenure system. Today, however, its status is less secure: changing demographics, declining government aid, rising costs, and demanding constituencies are prompting many colleges and universities to reevaluate their practical and philosophical commitment to tenure.

Organizational theorists generally agree that once a formalized practice or system gains legitimacy within a set of organizations, it has become institutionalized and is then adopted by other similar organizations. But here is where the picture turns fuzzy. While organizational decision makers may unhesitatingly embrace a practice or system in principle, they will shape its implementation to suit the characteristics of their organization.

Tenure systems fit neatly into this conceptual framework. Universities and colleges have more, or fewer, tenured and tenure-track faculty depending on what this paper's authors identify as technical and institutional pressures. Demands from oversight bodies, parents, and students to minimize costs put a premium on technical efficiency, which in turn makes financial resources, such as tuition, endowments, and other revenues (from grants, subsidies, dining and dormitory fees, etc.) critical variables in the tenure equation. The quality of the faculty, the institution's reputation, and the intensity of its research focus—all of which reflect the professional norms defined by the tenure system—are equally important. Then there are the faculty unions and accrediting agencies, whose concerns about conditions of employment and professional standards conceivably affect how tenure is implemented. In addition, the civil service model in government employment, which ostensibly protects against political influence, is a factor at public colleges and universities. Other variables include total enrollment, change in enrollment, the number of degree-granting programs, institutional age, presence of a medical school, and number of graduate students in non-professional programs.

By and large, the analytic results confirmed the researchers' hypotheses. Higher non-tuition revenues and larger endowments reduce pressure for cost efficiencies, thereby strengthening implementation of tenure systems; greater dependence on tuition, by contrast, heightens student and parental awareness about expenses and weakens implementation of a system that is more costly than one in which employees can be dismissed at any time. The study found that status as a public college or university positively affects the number of tenured and tenure-track faculty. It also showed that the more research grants a university or college receives, the higher the proportion of faculty in tenured or tenure-track positions. On the influence of faculty unions and accreditations, the results were surprising. The analysis revealed that the presence of a union has no significant impact on implementation of tenure systems although the number of accreditations does; that is, the more accreditations a school has, the greater the number of practice-oriented faculty hired into non-tenure track positions.

**Methodology:** The researchers used five panels of data covering the period August, 1988–July, 1997 and a randomly chosen sample of 557 colleges and universities. The analysis is based on a generalized linear model for time series data.

**Source document:** "Institutions in Action: Tenure Systems and Faculty Employment in Colleges and Universities," presented to the Administrative Sciences Association of Canada, Banff, Alberta, June 2006; best paper award from the association's management theory division.

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