**Why do so few tenured professors get fired? Because it is really hard to get tenure.**

by [Alan Talaga](http://isthmus.com/topics/alan-talaga/) - May 28, 2016



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**Assembly Speaker Robin Vos** has been busy writing columns and posts critical of tenure for newspapers and right-wing news sites across the state. It must be a fun way for him to spend his downtime now that the Legislature isn’t in session. Vos (R-Rochester) has spent most of his adult life criticizing the UW System. Calling out professors is kind of his passion project.

In one of his columns, Vos points out what he believes is a damning statistic about the UW — [very few tenured professors get fired](http://www.channel3000.com/news/vos-data-shows-uw-tenure-means-job-for-life/39743660).

Yep, too many people keep their jobs. Because the only way to run a successful enterprise is to fire people regularly. Under the Legislature’s microscope, a lack of failure is considered to be failure.

It’s an oddly skewed look at the data, one that overlooks something huge: It is really, really hard to get tenure, particularly at a research university like UW-Madison or UW-Milwaukee.

To even get on a tenure track, a future professor has to complete a doctorate. That’s a fairly lofty prerequisite — researching, developing and defending a dissertation is no easy task. And Ph.D. candidates often get experience teaching college courses, either as a TA or leading summer courses.

After earning a doctorate, there is usually postdoc work to get them the notice and the backing to get a job as an assistant professor.

Once hired as an assistant professor, they spend a half-decade or more juggling a bunch of job duties in the hopes that they will eventually get tenure.

It is not a light workload, particularly since you are expected to teach. For some, it is one class a semester. But for many it is two classes. If those classes each meet three times a week for an hour, and the tenure-track professor does two hours of prep per lecture, teaching alone is at least a 30-hour-a-week job.

And, at many universities, the tenure review board will look at teaching evaluations, so hopefully the students like the tenure-track professor.

On top of teaching, assistant professors bounce between a number of service roles. They hold office hours. They advise undergraduate and graduate students, guide their research projects. They serve on boards and work with the community — the Wisconsin Idea thing is still a core part of the UW’s mission.

After all that, these young faculty members must do the work that really determines whether or not they get that brass ring of tenure: research and publication. The whole point of research is to try something new. It doesn’t matter if the professor’s discipline is sociology or engineering — nothing is guaranteed in research. But that professor better hope his or her research has some useful findings. Because the whole career trajectory will be shaped by these first five to seven years.

Then they have to disseminate their work. By the time they come up for tenure review, they need a healthy body of peer-reviewed journal articles. They should probably have at least one published book under their belts as well.

A young faculty member can do all this work and still not get tenure at that university. After that, the person has to look for work at a different college/university or get hired as a lecturer for a fraction of a tenured professors’ pay. Some give up and choose a different line of work.

It’s really not all that different from starting a business. Bold people entering highly competitive fields in the hope that innovation will bring about success. There’s a risk of failure, but success brings nice rewards.

By the time someone gets tenure, they’ve been tried and tested. They’ve taken part in a job interview that went on for years. Almost everyone who would underperform or be lazy on the job gets washed out in the process. Tenure isn’t a license to be lazy; it’s a license to take risks.

For those who get tenure, it is the culmination of more than a decade of work. Low rates of dismissal are not a sign of lax firing processes. They’re a testament to the dedication of hard-working individuals and diligent tenure review boards.

Similarly, if the UW System starts dismissing more faculty members in the future, that’s not a sign that weakened tenure is a success. It could be a sign that the best young faculty members no longer want to jump through the years of hoops that is the tenure process. Why dedicate a half decade or more of your life in a state where the Legislature and the Board of Regents have already weakened tenure once and show signs that they’d be willing to further weaken it in the future?

Tenure ends up being a job for life for many professors because they’ve dedicated their lives to this job.

- See more at: http://isthmus.com/opinion/madland/why-do-so-few-tenured-professors-get-fired/#sthash.5d3RoF9p.dpuf