

LEADER-TELEGRAM

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It Seems to Me: No tenure, no raises, no nothing

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by / Jon Loomis

Like many people who have attended a university (and also a great many who have not), Leader-Telegram Editor Don Huebscher has an opinion on the merits of faculty tenure (July 19 column).

Huebscher believes tenure should be replaced by a system of rewards for “excellent” professors — those whose classes are fun and thought-provoking — and punishments for “slackers”: professors who read from the textbook and show little enthusiasm.

As a tenured faculty member in UW-Eau Claire’s extremely excellent (also fun, and thought-provoking!) creative writing program, I couldn’t agree more. At this point, I would happily trade the tenure protections we no longer have for the substantial raises our excellent, fun, thought-provoking faculty deserve. In fact, I support just about any mechanism that would help to bring our salaries into line with those at peer schools nationally, which are 25 to 30 percent higher than those at UW-EC, on average (it’s true — you could look it up).

So yes, please, merit raises absolutely — the sooner the better!

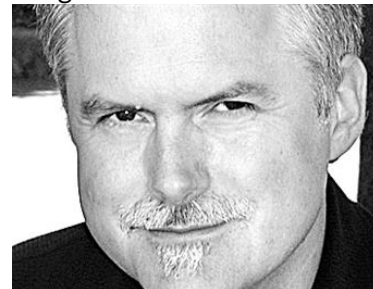
The other advantage to the Huebscher Plan? Administration would be thrilled to replace a system that costs nothing and builds institutional memory and worker loyalty (tenure, I mean), with a system of monetary rewards that’s likely to be very expensive! Oh, wait — maybe that’s not quite right. In fact, it’s completely wrong. In fact, we don’t even have enough money to maintain current staffing levels, let alone pay existing faculty more than they’re already making.

Mysteriously enough, the Legislature has not put aside a pot of money to cover the expense of rewarding the UW System’s many hundreds of excellent faculty. Nor have they set aside an additional few tens of millions to help with recruiting and retaining faculty, now that we’re the only state in the union which, in statute, gives its Board of Regents the power to fire faculty for the purpose of “program re-direction.” Turns out, in the last two budgets they’ve actually cut the living daylight out of the pool of money that covers faculty compensation.

Maybe instead of money, we can reward excellent profs with Target gift cards! Still too expensive? How about certificates? We could get student workers to design them in Microsoft Word and print them out on the office printer! If we had any paper. Or toner. Or student workers.

So, forget those rewards for excellence, folks — there’s no money for that, and likely never will be. Or for faculty retention in the face of competing offers. Or for

Images:



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increasing our pay scale relative to competing schools. Or even to keep from laying off existing faculty and staff.

With tenure gone (and if “tenured” faculty can be fired en masse for unspecified “budgetary purposes” – and they can, now – it’s really, seriously, totally gone), the only “incentives” for UW-EC and other system faculty will be punitive ones. The beatings will continue, in other words, until we’re all having “fun.”

Huebscher believes tenure for UW system professors is no longer necessary, since system campuses aren’t in turmoil as they were during the Vietnam war. Does Huebscher really think there haven’t been any contentious or controversial issues on university campuses since Vietnam? Is he not aware that people at universities in Wisconsin work with stem cells, or teach and research climate change? Evolution? Critical race theory? Labor history?

Is he not aware that controversial books are taught in English classes (and written by English professors)? That some concepts taught in history and economics and science classrooms may be upsetting to certain students and/or politicians? Is he not aware of the case of oil billionaire Harold Hamm and the University of Oklahoma’s Oklahoma Geological Survey? How about Northwestern’s Laura Kipnis, or LSU’s Teresa Buchanan? Or, closer to home, UW-Madison’s Steven Deller or Sara Goldrick Rab?

I could go on all day. In higher education, tenure is an earned status that guarantees nothing more or less than due process. It exists to protect professors who are doing their jobs, not to protect those who aren’t doing their jobs. But of course, you’d never know that if you had to depend on Huebscher for your information.

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