Second Task Force on Tenure

Members

Nadia El-Cheikh, Professor, Department of History and Archaeology, FAS
Ahmad Dallal (chair), Professor, Department of History and Archaeology, FAS; Provost
Zaher Dawy, Professor, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, FEA
Arne Dietrich, Professor, Department of Psychology, FAS
Mutasem El-Fadel, Professor and Chair, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, FEA
Samia Khoury, Professor, Director of Multiple Sclerosis Center, Director of Abu-Haidar Neuroscience Institute, FM
Ammar Olabi, Associate Professor, Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences, FAFS
Assem Safieddine, Professor, Finance, Accounting, and Managerial Economics Track, OSB
Abla Sibai, Professor, Department of Epidemiology and Population Health, FHS
Debra Callaghan, Assistant to the Provost

Charge of the President to the Second Task Force on Tenure

Despite the passage of three years since the faculty and the Board of Trustees of AUB inconclusively debated the challenges of reinstating tenure in the winter and spring of 2008, the issue has never fully receded, but has remained an implicit question lurking in the background. I believe it is now time to reopen the debate formally and to reframe it, in order to reflect certain significant changes that have taken place in the past three years.

The idea of reinstating tenure constituted a major preoccupation of my predecessor, President John Waterbury, under whose appointment a great deal of internal and external assessment took place, setting the stage for discussions which, at the time, proved contentious on a number of points. We are fortunate to begin in a different place, having the benefit of the Charles Vest Report (2006), the Report on the Task Force on Tenure (2007), the “Senate Statement Regarding Tenure” of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Faculty Senate (2008), and the minutes of the Senate at those meetings when tenure was debated in 2008. Moreover, in the intervening time the University has weighed and approved new procedures for the promotion and review of faculty members, implemented in 2010.

My own sense of the record of past deliberations is that a number of important issues were debated simultaneously, which tended to obscure the central question of whether the reinstatement of tenure is a genuine boon to AUB. There are in fact three separate challenges to be addressed, and they are to be answered in sequence, rather than in parallel.

The first is a strategic question that assesses the advantages and disadvantages of tenure itself, the utility of which in the United States has attracted skepticism of late; in fact the overall number of tenured and tenure-track faculty has been trending downward for some time. The statistical trend does not necessarily spell the end of all tenured systems, but it does reflect the fact that universities have been constrained by various factors to take a hard look at life tenure in the academy.
Tenure is usually advocated on the basis of gradual improvement in faculty quality, academic freedom, better developed research agendas, stable intellectual communities and mentoring capabilities, proactive faculty governance, and the recruitment of the very best scholars and students, *inter alia*. Disadvantages include the perception of guaranteed lifelong job security that is not balanced by performance review or accountability, long-term fiscal commitment to a cadre of tenured professors, and the stagnation of research agendas with little impetus for growth in new directions, factors that are now complicated by the elimination of a mandatory retirement age. Thus the first question to be considered is:

1. What is the rationale for reinstating tenure at AUB?

To address fiscal questions, I require that the committee’s work be supplemented by a financial analysis projecting the costs of a proposed tenure system as compared to the current system of contractual engagement, and suggesting how such costs can be managed through a program of phased retirement, with appropriate inducements offered to senior faculty who choose to retire early. To some extent, the committee will have to consider the second question, below, as part of this analysis.

The other two questions can be addressed only if the first is answered convincingly, yet they are equally critical:

2. Assuming the argument for tenure is persuasive and the grounds compelling, how would a contemporary system of tenure be constructed at AUB?

Reinstatement of tenure at AUB does not mean that the university must revert precisely to its previous stance on tenure for all professorial-rank faculty. I charge the committee to review systems of hiring practice at other universities, which, in parallel to a tenure system, can include non-tenurable lines in areas of clinical work, pure research, and language instruction, or lines referred to as “professors of practice,” which do not carry tenure expectation. There are also systems of “rolling tenure,” which guarantee long-term employment with the expectation of serious periodic review; and still other systems that allow lifelong tenure, but bring with it regular “tenure reviews” that call for rigorous assessment for tenured full professors. These other options may offer models that are useful to consider in our present situation, bringing a measure of academic accountability and fiscal flexibility to a true tenure system.

3. How should such a system of tenure be implemented?

Because this question touches directly on the livelihoods of our colleagues and friends, it is perhaps the most sensitive one of all to answer. The problem of implementation has shifted ground since the last time the tenure question was debated, due primarily to the longer-term contracts that have been introduced by the new promotion procedures and the systematic reviews that are a mandatory part of these procedures.

In their earlier report, the first Task Force on Tenure also suggested a revision of the then-current promotion criteria, on which a tenure system could be based, a reasonable extension of their brief. I do not view this issue as part of the charge to the Second Task Force, though it is an important matter that must be addressed: the three questions posed above are substantive enough as they stand.

I ask the Second Task Force to take the remainder of the spring semester in discussions among themselves and with their faculty colleagues, with a view to refining their answers to the three questions
and to presenting a recommendation to the Board of Deans and Faculty Senate in the fall of 2011 as to whether, and how, tenure should be reinstated at AUB.