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Tenure carries both privileges and responsibilities

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Regional

Tenure carries both privileges and responsibilities

Politicians and many in the general public ask, “Why do university faculty need tenure?” One could give many reasons based on history or philosophy. But sometimes examples prove the most powerful explanations.

Two weeks ago, on July 18, one of the world’s academic heroes passed away. His name is not familiar to most, but thanks to his work we live in a healthier world. His name was Herbert Needleman. Born on Dec. 13, 1927, in Philadelphia, he came from a Jewish family of modest means. His father sold furniture, and his mother, whose family owned a pickle business, ran the household.

He graduated as a medical doctor from the University of Pennsylvania in 1952, specializing in pediatrics and psychiatry. He went on to be a faculty member at Temple University and Harvard Medical School. In 1981 he became a professor of child psychiatry and pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

After medical school and while working at a community psychiatric clinic in north Philadelphia, Needleman became intrigued by young patients who – while they appeared bright – showed symptoms of lead poisoning, including difficulty in speaking.

By the 1950s it was already known that high doses of lead caused mental problems, even permanent brain damage and death. But what was not known at that time was how low levels of lead could affect children’s mental development. At that time, with the rapid increase in the number of automobiles running on leaded gasoline, with virtually all paint in homes and other buildings

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being lead-based, and with lead pipes running water, lead was, quite literally, nearly everywhere. It was especially present in urban areas.

Needleman started to study the composition of teeth shed by children aged 6 and 7 in Philadelphia and Boston and found out that kids living in poor urban neighborhoods had lead levels five times higher, on average, than those of their peers in the suburbs.

In 1979, he published a paper in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, wherein he and his coauthors reported that children whose accumulated exposure to lead was at the highest level scored four points lower on an I.Q. test than youngsters whose exposure was at the lowest level.

Further, teachers of those kids reported them as having a host of issues, including attention deficit and behavioral problems. A follow-up study by Needleman showed a correlation between high lead levels and delayed reading abilities.

His studies and those of other colleagues encouraged stiffer regulation of

lead in gas, tin cans, paint, household pipes and other products. Today the federal health authorities consider lead unsafe at any level for children.

Needleman’s findings caused the lead industry to

mount an attack on his research and character. He was accused of scientific misconduct. He was cleared of those charges but not before his own home institution, the University of Pittsburgh, conducted its own investigation and locked him out of his own files, putting bars on his file cabinets.

Despite the professional and personal attacks he endured, he moved forward and was finally exonerated of all charges, and his research became the lighting rod in combating the effects of lead and other toxic chemicals in the environment.

Needleman also stood firm on many of his other convictions – many that rattled the political and corporate establishment. In the 1960s he went to jail for participating in campaigns against the Vietnam war and became the head of a group called the Committee of Responsibility to Save War-Burned and War-Injured Vietnamese Children, which brought injured youngsters to the United States for medical care. He brought one of those children to live at his home with his family.

When asked about how he was able to keep his job despite all these attacks he had a simple answer: tenure.

Tenure is one of the oldest and most significant traditions in academic life. Although some people today see it as a labor issue, the fact of the matter is that it is rooted in the idea that one cannot be fired from an academic institution just because of unpopular ideas or research findings. Today this is what we call “academic freedom.”

The notion of academic freedom was first developed

in medieval times, but has undergone a metamorphosis. Initially, academic freedom referred to a scholar’s guaranteed right to travel freely from one place to another in the interest of education. At the time, there was a great demand for people who could teach. Travel between urban centers was frequent. Later, the idea of academic freedom developed into the freedom to teach or research anything in any manner.

Unfortunately, there are some cases where the privilege of being tenured is abused by some faculty who, after obtaining it, significantly reduce their academic activity or use that protection to engage in conduct unbecoming to their institutions.

This is why the very notion of tenure is under attack. As recently as this year, legislation has been introduced in Iowa and Missouri to remove tenure from professors at state institutions.

One of the big lessons of Needleman’s life is very simple. Without tenure academics will be unprotected from political and special interest attacks just because their ideas are inconvenient to some. By the same token, faculty in colleges and universities need to make sure that such a privilege is granted only to individuals who can demonstrate that they are not only worthy of it but also that they are going to use that privilege responsibly.

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