

Great universities don't reward mediocrity

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The new school year is upon us, and Carleton University is forging ahead under new management. Veteran university administrator Roseann Runte is at the helm, and many are excited at the potential for change.

Ms. Runte is hoping to promote Carleton as a centre of teaching and research excellence. She's making some big and useful plans, including strategic investments in key areas, new construction, and innovative community outreach.

Still, Ms. Runte will have a hard time making real headway if she does not boldly address the two thorniest problems in Canadian academia today: tenure standards and merit-based pay.

Tenure is the linchpin of the academic system, offering professors the freedom to teach and research the issues they care most about. It protects their intellectual integrity from politics, economics, and ideological fads, and helps ensure students are exposed to a wide range of views.

Tenure is also good to its recipients, however, promising professors challenging jobs for the rest of their working lives. Starting salaries are modest, but three to four decades of secure employment, coupled with regular raises and pension contributions, make tenure a worthy economic prize.

Thus while tenure is important, it is also expensive and out of step with the modern labour market, where performance standards and merit-based rewards are the name of the game. South of the border, tenure-track jobs are increasingly rare. Costs are rising, and American taxpayers and private tuition payers are restless.

What does it take to get tenure in the U.S.? In 1999, I landed my first academic job at a top-ranked, privately funded American institution, and soon learned that it would take a decade of teaching and high-quality publishing to prepare my file for tenure.

Other American universities are more comparable to Carleton, but tenure requirements in these well-regarded and publicly funded schools are also demanding. Tenure typically comes after five years, a solid teaching record, a book or its equivalent, and four or five articles in highly competitive journals.

In Canada overall -- and at Carleton specifically -- the bar is far lower. Junior Carleton professors come up for tenure after just three years, leaving them little time to do much but demonstrate scholarly "promise." Teaching scores matter, but two or three articles in minor journals are typically sufficient to satisfy the research requirement. Expectations are also ill-defined and elastic, transforming any potential tenure denial into a legal grievance-in-waiting.

As a result, tenure is rarely denied at Carleton and other Canadian universities; once hired, a junior professor's chance of earning a job for life is high.

Carleton has plenty of ambitious and talented faculty, many of whom are excellent researchers and teachers. Its uniquely collegial atmosphere, moreover, is likely linked to the dearth of American-style competitive pressures.

Incentives do matter, however, and lower standards produce lower aggregate outcomes. This is doubly true when university administrators are unable to differentially compensate higher achievers. At Carleton, like many Canadian universities, salary increases are determined by collective bargaining between administrators and unions, not individual achievement. Most faculty members receive identical raises, regardless of performance.

Although this equity is ideologically appealing, it does little to boost productivity, and even less to promote "excellence."

Ms. Runte cannot unilaterally change Carleton's standards; change will have to come from within. Reform should begin at the top, however. If Ms. Runte seeks excellence, her efforts will be more credible if tenure and compensation are more rigorous.

Higher standards are also crucial for our relations with students. Each semester, we urge them to work hard and excel, and then reward higher achieving students with better grades.

Why should we treat ourselves differently?

More accountability would also safeguard our relations with the public. If tenure is to be publicly funded, taxpayers are entitled to know that universities grant such plum positions sparingly, and only after rigorous and transparent consideration.

What, then, can Ms. Runte do? In the short term, any effort to ram through radical change will fail, since both tenure and compensation are ably defended by well-meaning unions. Although faculty unions fulfill a vital role, they are also, unfortunately, tacitly protecting mediocrity and limiting incentives for achievement.

In the medium term, however, Ms. Runte could help shift the terms of debate by initiating university-wide discussions and commissioning surveys of students, faculty and the community. She could also assemble comparative metrics, examining how Carleton's standards measure up to peers in Canada and abroad.

She might even pursue these efforts in collaboration with other Ontario universities, many of whom also urgently need reform. Within a few years, Ms. Runte and others could shift the public debate sufficiently to prompt union flexibility.

Some tenured faculty will always oppose change, but many seem eager for reform, believing there are better ways to organize our collective incentive system. Few want to import America's excesses, but many want to find a reasonable middle ground.

As an experienced administrator, Ms. Runte is uniquely placed to help Carleton find that happy medium. With her help, Carleton could become a leader in national academic reform, encouraging other universities to experiment with change.

With effort, wisdom and leadership, Ms. Runte can help us raise standards, boost accountability, and place Carleton on the road to real excellence.

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