

August 2, 2012

The Detroit News

Editorial: Wayne State right to tackle tenure

Wayne State University would like to change the process for dismissing tenured faculty members. And while the union that represents professors is creating a big fuss, the proposed contract language is fair. Most importantly, if the changes stick, they will give the administration the ability to regain more control of university costs.

Right now, once a professor earns the protections of tenure, it can take years for a university to take it away. In effect, tenure has traditionally meant lifetime job protection. And many universities have to be in the midst of a financial collapse before they can layoff tenured faculty.

WSU would like to avert fiscal emergencies before they begin. During the past 25 years, Michigan's 15 state universities have seen a large drop in state aid. Smart budgeting has become vital.

The administration's tenure recommendations would allow the university to act more quickly and efficiently when cuts are necessary. The current contract expired July 31, but the university and faculty union agreed to an extension through the end of September as they negotiate.

Neal McCluskey, with the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, says Wayne State's tenure modifications would make the university a "big outlier" nationally. He's supportive of giving administrators more authority to make firing or layoff decisions.

Tenure protections offer faculty the freedom to teach and research as see they see fit, without fear of retribution from administrators. That's a worthwhile aim, and WSU officials say they have no interest in ending those safeguards.

Faculty already undergo annual performance evaluations, which are conducted by a committee of their peers.

This peer review process would stay in place under the revised tenure rules, says Margaret Winters, associate vice president for academic personnel at WSU. As a tenured professor herself, Winters says she has the "highest respect" for tenure.

The evaluations are used to determine a professor's pay — similar to a merit pay system. Winters says the administration would also like the evaluation process to help weed out faculty who no longer are performing up to university standards, whether on the teaching or research fronts.

Critics of the changes say altering tenure protections will attract fewer top professors and jeopardize the university's research reputation. But Winters says that's not likely.

Overall, this is a common-sense approach, and given that the evaluations are overseen by fellow faculty, it's not as if the administration would start making arbitrary firing decisions.

Wayne State is making an important statement with its tenure modifications. The university would be better situated to handle financial shortfalls and ensure students have only the most committed professors. Faculty members who do good work have little to fear from the changes.

Other universities around the country are likely paying close attention.