

May 3, 2023

Dear Members of the North Carolina House of Representatives:

North Carolina is home to the oldest public university in the country. Chartered in 1789 with the aim of preparing the rising generation with an education, the University of North Carolina has evolved into a major research institution ranking 10th in the nation for federal research funds. Its annual research budget of \$1.2 billion, from a combination of federal and private sources, supports exploration and innovation across a broad range of disciplines. The proposed HB 715, which would eliminate tenure for new hires at state universities beginning in July 2024, is a short-sighted and ill-conceived policy that would significantly undercut what has been accomplished over decades by the thousands of individuals responsible for building a university system that ranks among the best in the world.

Why will eliminating tenure for new hires diminish North Carolina universities?

North Carolina will find itself at a disadvantage in attracting and retaining top-level faculty. Whether in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), humanities, or social sciences, faculty achieve their credentials only after long years of intensive graduate training. They then enter a competitive *national* job market, in which they may apply for dozens of different positions in as many states. Although academic job markets vary across disciplines, candidates who have choices are unlikely to opt for institutions where their research and teaching will not benefit from the academic freedom guaranteed by tenure. Were North Carolina to eliminate “tenure-track” positions—a designation enabling eligibility for tenure based on a combined record of research and teaching excellence as well as service to the institution—any public university in North Carolina would immediately become an employer of last choice among scholars who aspire to high quality teaching and research.

Scholars who do accept offers from North Carolina institutions, and who cannot apply for tenure because of legislated restrictions, confront serious disadvantages. Without tenure protections, they will shy away from daring and innovative research questions. Their scholarship will tilt towards “safe” areas of exploration less likely to generate the breakthroughs characteristic of top research institutions. Their teaching will be similarly cautious. Without tenure, a teacher avoids controversy, avoids the kinds of issues that students need and want to engage to become future leaders.

Tenure was instituted nearly a century ago, not as a sinecure, but to guarantee the academic freedom necessary to assure integrity and innovation both in research and teaching. A tenured scholar could ask controversial questions in the classroom and in developing new research projects. Scholarly pathways could draw from creativity, expertise, and evidence without limitations from state mandates or pressure. Tenure helps to protect university classrooms and laboratories as spaces where learning is advanced and new knowledge is created, rather than any given political platform promoted. America’s

colleges and universities draw faculty and students from around the world because of the research and educational advantages that follow from these principles of academic freedom.

Despite occasional media misrepresentations, tenure is not a license to slack off or engage in untoward behavior. Higher education institutions in general, including public institutions in North Carolina, evaluate faculty performance annually and articulate academic standards; violation is grounds for dismissal even for tenured faculty.

HB 715 also establishes a norm of one- to four-year renewable contracts, with adjudication by the Board of Trustees, rather than standard internal channels of governance; faculty would answer to a small group of state-appointed officials rather than to the oversight of their peers, thereby potentially making their research agendas vulnerable to the interference of a small elite group outside of the university.

These short contracts would prevent expert faculty in North Carolina from initiating the kinds of projects that produce those advances in human knowledge and understanding that change the world. Saddled with artificially short timelines, faculty would no longer be eligible for long-term federal grants that fund most science research. Those grants train students in data science, lab science, human behavior, and the science of teaching. The state could lose a generation of highly trained experts that now serve its employers and universities.

The American Historical Association urges you to reject HB 715 in the interest of maintaining the integrity, reputation, and quality of the public universities in North Carolina.

*With more than 11,000 members and chartered by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies, the American Historical Association is the largest membership association of professional historians in the world.*

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James R. Grossman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "J" and "R".

James R. Grossman  
Executive Director