

April 26, 2023

Dear Members of the Texas House of Representatives:

The American Historical Association lauds the state of Texas for its substantial investment in higher education. We remain especially impressed with the state's continued commitment to the central role of history in the higher education curriculum. Our concern lies with the contradiction between the stated goal of making these Texas public universities more competitive with counterparts in other states and the actual implications of Senate Bill 18, which will have precisely the opposite effect: creating an environment in the university that undermines rather than nourishes inquiry and learning.

The American Historical Association opposes SB 18, because it would eliminate tenure for new hires at public institutions in the state beginning in 2024.

Tenure was instituted nearly a century ago, not as a sinecure but to guarantee the academic freedom necessary to assure integrity and innovation in both 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 to engage in untoward behavior. Higher education institutions in general, including public institutions in Texas, evaluate faculty performance annually and articulate standards of behavior, violation of which is grounds for dismissal even for tenured faculty.

Why would eliminating tenure for new hires diminish Texas universities?

Texas universities will find themselves at a disadvantage in attracting top-level faculty. Whether in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields, 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 are unlikely to opt for institutions where their research and teaching will not benefit from the academic freedom guaranteed by tenure. Were Texas to eliminate "tenure-track" positions—a designation that those obtaining such a position might apply for tenure based on their record of research and teaching excellence as well as service to the institution—any public university in Texas would immediately become an employer of last choice among scholars who desire an environment amenable to high-quality teaching and research.

Scholars who do accept employment at Texas institutions, and who cannot even 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 toward “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, including the kinds of issues that students need and want to engage to become future leaders.

SB 18 requires that all faculty contracts be limited to three years or fewer. Such short contracts would prevent expert faculty in Texas from initiating exactly the kinds of projects that produce those advances in human knowledge and understanding that change the world. Saddled with artificially short timelines, Texas faculty would no longer be eligible for long-term federal grants that fund most science research. Those grants train Texas students in data science, lab science, human behavior, and the science of teaching. Texas could lose a generation of highly trained experts that now serve Texas employers and universities. If Texans want returns on their investments of public funds, the state needs to make not only financial investments in its infrastructure, but also investments in the development of expertise and innovation in its public universities. This requires long-term support for the individuals whose dedication makes those returns possible. SB 18 would instantly and irrevocably depreciate the value of the state’s admirable monetary investments in higher learning.

The American Historical Association urges you to reject SB 18 in the interest of maintaining the integrity, reputation, and quality of the public universities in Texas.

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