

Extended time, elevated expectations: The unappreciated downsides of pausing the tenure clock

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Affiliations are included on p. 4.



In 1971, Stanford became the first university to introduce tenure clock extensions in academia for new mothers. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) began recommending such policies a few years later, and in 2001, modified their recommendation to include primary or coequal caregivers, following either the birth or adoption of a child (1). By 2004, 43% of 255 surveyed institutions had formal clock-stop policies (2).

Time is undeniably lost due to life challenges such as parenthood, so extra time is naturally thought to be a way to fix the issue. And indeed, extensions can be valuable lifelines to the affected faculty. But tenure clock extensions are no silver bullet. A delay in the tenure decision postpones the accompanying salary raise, professional security, and acknowledgment of career achievements—and generally does so without commensurate extensions of internal and external funding. Tenure clock extensions can often make junior faculty members feel as though they must both run farther and climb higher (Fig. 1).

There are ways to improve these policies so that they better benefit both individuals and institutions. Here, we offer extension-related policies that support the success of early-career faculty, based on the literature and our own experiences. These include giving candidates agency through the flexibility to opt out of extensions and clear standards for tenure that are independent of a timeline. In cases where candidates do choose extensions, we urge universities to make them more equitable by extending funding along with the timeline and by mitigating the long-term consequences on salary.

There are ways to improve tenure extension policies so that they better benefit both individuals and institutions. Image credit: Shutterstock/Bilanol.

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This article contains supporting information online at <https://www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.2403489121/-/DCSupplemental>.

Published August 16, 2024.

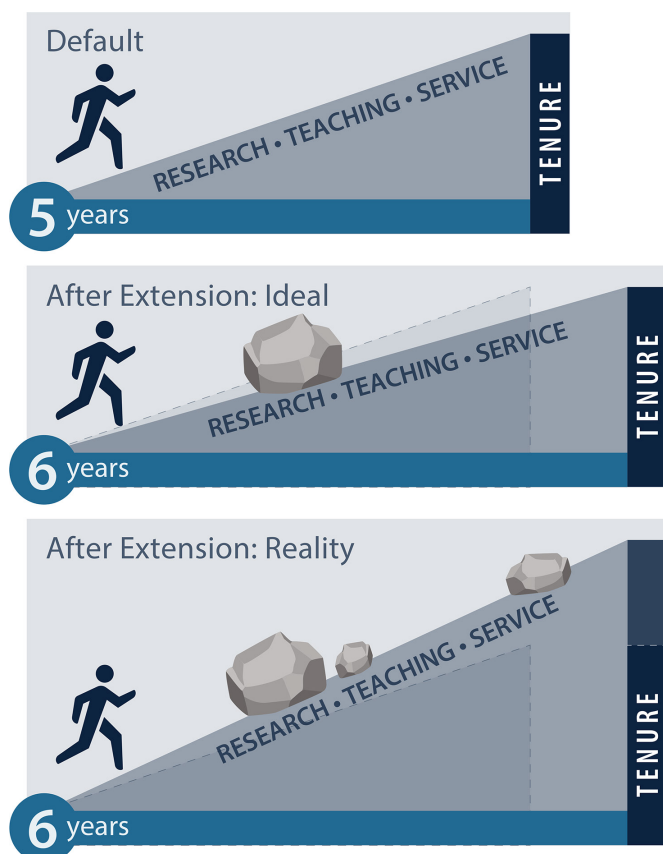


Fig. 1. The tenure track as a race up a hill. The typical tenure track (*Top*) involves reaching the bar for tenure in 5 years, although it can be as much as 8–11 years (3, 4). In the case of an extension, the intention (*Middle*) is to allow an additional year to reach the same bar; this results in a slightly lower “slope” to account for the presence of challenges along the way. However, in reality (*Bottom*), the bar for tenure often gets higher. Faculty have to climb a steeper slope for more time, while simultaneously having to navigate multiple obstacles. Image credit: Kristina Davis (University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN).

Extensions Aren’t Free

In recent decades, as women have formed larger and larger segments of the professoriate, and as men have, in many cases, become more active caregivers of their children, parental extensions have become commonplace. Other common justifications for extensions include lab renovations for new faculty or a move within or between institutions. More recently, some institutions have granted blanket extensions to account for the myriad delays and challenges faced during the COVID pandemic, including hiring difficulties, supply chain delays, reduced travel, and increased caregiving responsibilities. Even natural disasters such as Hurricane Sandy have spurred tenure clock extensions (5).

University departments often view extensions as painless, risk-free, “one-size-fits-all” remedies. But there can be significant costs, both financial and otherwise (6), for those who extend their time, as they serve in the precarious position of a pre-tenure faculty member.

First, tenure and promotion are generally accompanied by a significant raise, which has an impact on both immediate finances and lifetime earnings (Fig. 2).

Second, while extensions offer researchers more time, there are generally not commensurate extensions or increases to other resources. This sets up faculty for a potentially disastrous

conundrum, in which they need both the extension and the funds, but the former is useless without the latter. While many research grants, both internal and external, offer the option to take a no-cost extension, allowing additional time to complete the funded work, this does not replace or supplement the expenses that tenure-track faculty incur during a pandemic, parental leave, or lab renovation. As faculty must continue to pay their group members’ salaries, this significantly limits the funds available to do research once research resumes. The NIH and NSF recognize this potential pitfall and offer supplemental funding opportunities for caregiving responsibilities, but many other funders don’t, and extensions for other reasons are often not accommodated.

Third, pushing back the time of evaluation can sometimes negatively impact a tenure case. While many faculty are told that “waiting longer will only make your case stronger,” this is not necessarily true. Publication numbers steadily increase, but grant funding can come and go. If an extension puts the candidate significantly closer to the end of a grant funding period, then new expectations—for instance, for renewal or new funding—may crop up. Furthermore, unless universities explicitly instruct review committees to be agnostic regarding the time spent pre-tenure, committee members may still evaluate based on, for example, the funds brought in or number of papers published normalized to the years since starting the position. Doing so effectively raises the bar and leaves the candidate at a disadvantage.

Fourth, the pre-tenure position is, by definition, precarious, characterized by uncertainty and vulnerability. This can manifest in various ways, including susceptibility to bullying (7), manipulation, discrimination (8), harassment, exploitation, or even dismissal, particularly of faculty members who are otherwise already minoritized. The power dynamics within academic departments and the fear of jeopardizing their chances of tenure can leave junior faculty hesitant to report or confront such issues, further exacerbating their vulnerability.

Insurance Policy or Safety Net?

AAUP’s original 1940 “Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure” (9) stated that the tenure clock should not exceed seven years, under the rationale that it was intended to be a fixed probationary period, not an indefinite sentence. This policy is interesting in light of the increasing number of faculty with multiple extensions. And this is not a hypothetical scenario; we know of one junior faculty member who accrued, during five years on the tenure track, an astonishing four years of clock extensions. These much longer clocks call for extra attention, to make sure that they help, rather than hinder, faculty.

For years, researchers have identified opt-out policies as the best practice, in which individuals don’t have to take special action to request the extension and can decline if they so choose (10). Along these lines, many institutions’ pandemic extension policies are encouraging, with 40% offering blanket opt-out extensions, according to one survey (11). Unfortunately, most other extensions are opt-in and do not offer the opportunity to opt out if it turns out that the event was less disruptive than feared.

In many cases where faculty request or are granted tenure clock extensions and then wish to go back to their original clock, university policies often require adherence to the

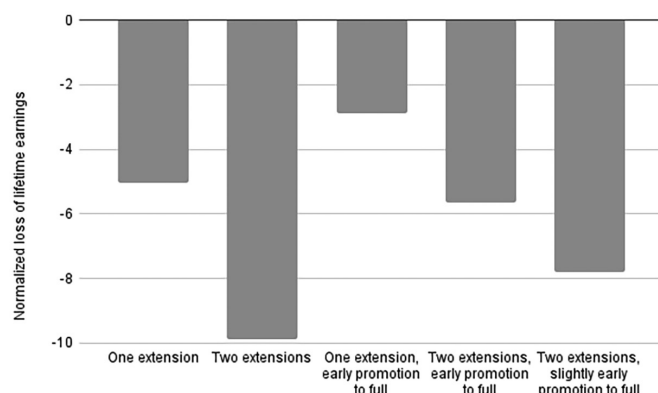


Fig. 2. Estimated loss of lifetime earnings due to delayed promotion. The impact is significantly more than the loss of the raise for a single year. Based on a few basic assumptions, a single extension (here, a raise of \$10k delayed by one year) could lead to net losses of 5 times that over a 30-year career and nearly 10 times for two extensions. These numbers don't take into account compound interest, summer salary, or additional merit raises, which would be reduced as well. Earning loss is normalized by the amount of the raise, here \$10k. See [SI Appendix](#) for information on model assumptions.

adjusted clock and label the original clock as “early.” This revised expectation can (and often does) occur, even at universities with nominally opt-out policies due to cultural norms around tenure and promotion. Thus, formal policies supporting opt-out options, while important, offer only a partial solution. Faculty should be able to opt out without being viewed as going up for early tenure, which is generally known to be held to a higher standard. Otherwise, having achieved similar productivity as someone lacking the circumstance that necessitated the extension, their case could nevertheless appear weaker in light of the “early” designation.

To progress through the ranks at the same rate as their peers, faculty who take extensions not only have to achieve the same productivity, but also have to produce more to overcome the challenges of an early case. This can be clearly seen in a recent case at The University of Texas at Austin, where a woman opted not to take a second maternity extension and was denied on the grounds that she did not meet the higher bar that early tenure demands. The university's actions were deemed pregnancy discrimination, and she was awarded \$3 million (12).

The complicated standards for “early” tenure look different at a medical school, but are also quite challenging for faculty. In general, the idea behind long (e.g., 10-year) tenure clocks is to offer flexibility, allowing some to go up for tenure early in year 6 or 7, but allowing others, who had a baby or went through a pandemic, to go up in year 8 or 9. However, this often results in one of several possible undesirable outcomes: First, chairs and other administrators have substantial leeway over when to allow someone to go up and may simply not allow it until the last possible date. The rationale could be discriminatory, but could also be based on good intentions (to protect a case that might be challenged above or simply to minimize risk to the department's investment). Second, in many places, the long clock raises the bar for tenure higher and higher until nine years of perfect, unimpeded productivity are required to meet expectations, and anyone who needs the accommodation of an extension might simply not be successful. Third, in most cases, “extensions” do not actually move the obligatory up-or-out date,

but rather postpone the earliest point at which the faculty member can be considered for tenure: essentially all the downsides of a clock-stop, but without the potential upside of having more time if needed.

These issues raise a key question about universities' approaches: are tenure clock extensions insurance policies, or safety nets? An insurance policy entails some payment in return for security, whether or not the insurance is ever used. A safety net, however, protects users in case of a stumble or fall or challenge, but has no real impact if it's never needed. We believe that the best model for clock extensions is a safety net; unlike an insurance policy model, extensions should not come at a significant cost to junior faculty. Of course, whichever approach a university takes must be clearly communicated to its faculty.

Policy Prescriptions

In light of these challenges, institutions should consider policies that promote the proper use of extensions when needed, while avoiding the unnecessary prolonging of tenure in cases where they are not. To ensure that taking extensions does not unduly penalize faculty, we suggest: 1) policies that allow and encourage opting out of extensions if not needed; 2) clear, objective standards for tenure regardless of timeline; 3) concomitant extensions of funding; and 4) policies to ensure salary equity.

First, departmental and university leadership, alongside their faculty members, should regularly revisit the decision to extend the tenure clock, to evaluate whether the candidate still needs the extension. Policies should ensure that extensions are truly opt-out and that faculty will not be punished for “going up early.”

Second, tenure expectations should be established clearly and objectively. This would avoid undesirable “moving of the goal posts,” either in the case of an extended clock or an extended-and-then-reverted clock. While many departments and fields have flexible and vague tenure standards to accommodate multiple ways that a faculty member can succeed, regular meetings with concrete feedback on the expectations—tailored to an individual—can help candidates to be confident in the standards by which they will be evaluated whenever their tenure case moves forward. In the same vein, once an extension is granted (or declined), tenure evaluation committees should be explicitly instructed to evaluate the body of work, regardless of the time spent on the clock, when making tenure decisions.

Third, funding must be extended, and supplemented at cost, on a similar timeline as the tenure clock. Time without resources is not an asset. Indeed, given that students and employees continue to be paid during a pandemic, maternity leave, or lab renovation, extensions that are not supported financially often do little but push people closer to a financial cliff, even as the security of tenure is delayed. While this may lead to a temporary cost for the university, it is a small price for the long-term investment in their faculty. Of course, denying tenure also comes with costs, such as the lack of future overhead and the need for a new startup for a new hire.

Fourth, universities should commit to the financial security of those who need extensions. Several institutions managed this particularly well during the pandemic; for instance, the University of Massachusetts Amherst (13), the University of

California, Irvine (14), and the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center set policies that ensured taking an extension would not be a financial burden for faculty, by applying the raise associated with tenure and promotion retroactively to when the faculty member would otherwise have achieved tenure.

Clearly, tenure extensions can be a valuable lifeline, and, in many cases, the benefits may significantly outweigh the costs. We are, to some extent, encouraged by the high uptake of COVID extensions and the increasing use of parental leave, both by birthing parents and their partners. In light of their ubiquity, though, we strongly encourage university and departmental leadership to carefully consider and intentionally mitigate the unintended professional, personal, and financial burdens that they may create.

Institutions should consider a multifaceted approach, with policies that allow tenure clock extensions to function

as a genuine safety net, not an insurance policy exacting a toll, irrespective of its utilization. It's imperative that faculty, institutions, and funding bodies continue to discuss and research tenure extensions and their impact. Only then can we ensure that policies designed to support faculty are truly beneficial—without hidden costs and unintended repercussions.

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Author contributions: M.A.H. and L.K.W. analyzed data; M.A.H. conceived of the idea; and M.A.H., K.M., C.B.I., L.K.W., D.C.B., E.M.M., and M.W.E. wrote the paper.

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