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Why IT professionals should receive tenure (essay)

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Education technology has become an essential component of modern college teaching. If you doubt this, just ask the students and faculty members at the University of California, Davis. [Back in May](#), they had to deal with the [failure of their learning management system](#) right before their final exam period. While the university [restored some of its functionality](#) in time for testing and grading, users had to [make do without many of the digital services](#) upon which they had become dependent.

Davis has experienced periodic LMS outages for years, ever since it began to [outsource maintenance of the system](#). But it is hardly the only university to suffer from this type of outage, and it is certainly worth considering what higher education institutions can do to avoid such situations. One of the first steps should be rethinking the role and position of IT professionals on campuses.

The people who choose, order, install, build and maintain IT systems on campuses usually have job titles like IT (maybe

network) specialist or instructional (web) designer, and are in some branch of the campus org chart under the chief information officer. Such IT service staff almost never have the title “professor,” which means they are unlikely to have tenure.

We think that's unfortunate, because people who make decisions about ed-tech infrastructure need to hear from experts who have the freedom to speak on behalf of what's best for education, not just what's best for a university's bottom line. After all, if ed tech really is the future of education, these colleagues of ours will play a vital role in determining what that future will look like. That means they need the protections of academic freedom, which means they need to be able to earn tenure.

Of course, not all IT staff do the kind of work that justifies the possibility of tenure. The IT professionals who do hardware and network installation, repair work, and other support tasks shouldn't be faculty members. But other IT workers who choose and set up complex systems, work with students and faculty members on pedagogy and research, have advanced and highly specialized training, and who are expected to research and develop new systems for their universities should be faculty and should therefore be eligible to earn tenure.

The situation is similar in university libraries. A library, be it one with miles of stacks housing blocks of wood pulp or simply an air-conditioned server room full of electronic resources, is an

essential component of any true university. Librarians affect education, even if they don't run their own classes. The American Library Association's [Core Values of Librarianship](#) closely resemble the values codified as academic freedom for more traditional faculty. Some library personnel who do tasks like reshelving books do not qualify for tenure, but certain IT staff could have an expectation of scholarly output, would be given positions in faculty governing bodies, would receive support for attendance at conferences, and so on.

Why should universities extend tenure to a new class of workers at a time when they're taking it away from so many other employees? Quite simply, it will save them money in the long run. If Davis had given its IT specialists tenure, they might have been much more likely to speak out against outsourcing their LMS maintenance. And if there hadn't been so many outages, perhaps that institution wouldn't have required as many people to respond to each one.

Similarly, at a recent conference, a university IT professional (whom we leave anonymous to protect his job), told us that it would be impossible to use free, open-source software on his campus because the administration liked the control of having a contract with a commercial software vendor. Free software is said to require more and more qualified IT staff, but it still might be cheaper than a paid approach, because it doesn't require expensive licensing fees. This would also leave those IT staff free to customize the open-source software and to innovate with other members of the

university community.

Industry generally pays much better than academe, so it can be highly competitive for a higher education institution to hire skilled IT professionals. But the job stability that comes with tenure could be an employee benefit for universities to offer those employees with skills in high demand. This is, in fact, a problem that universities have already solved: they attract people to faculty positions in law, business and the many other fields where there is lucrative employment outside academe by offering other incentives, such as job stability and the possibility to take risks, innovate and expand human knowledge.

Now, however, without the ability to speak freely, campus IT staff can as often be an obstacle as an aid in finding the best solutions that use IT. They usually enforce the use of the particular tools that the administration has purchased or licensed, with minimal regard to whether those tools actually solve the real problems of education or research.

It is unclear to us whether a change in perspective is at all possible with such IT professionals located where they now are on most campus organization charts. That's the main reason why we think the decision makers in IT merit tenure and the academic freedom that comes with it. Giving them protection and stability would co-opt them to work on behalf of scholarship and research, making of them allies of the rest of the faculty and not enforcers of a particular

IT regime.

Without extending tenure to IT professionals, campuses will continue to spend money on expensive commercial IT systems and the inferior ed-tech tools that generally come with them. Moreover, the people who tend those systems will not be the kind of innovative individuals that institutions generally try to hire for positions on their regular faculty. Since IT professionals will play an ever-growing role in educational decision making in our increasingly wired campuses, giving them the same protections as regular faculty members is both economical and logical. To do otherwise is to risk forfeiting all the educational benefits that technology can bring.