

Transition to Emeritus Professor via Senior Professor

An opinion piece by J. Robert Cooke

The four traditional ranks for tenure track faculty at Cornell University mark major milestones in a faculty member's life cycle. Until recent years¹, emeritus status had an age-based criterion. With the uncapping of retirement age for tenured faculty, a whole new dynamic was introduced. Because faculty members can continue their employment indefinitely, a fundamental budgetary uncertainty has been created. An important corollary is that the salary previously released through a very predictable retirement progression may become unavailable for hiring a newly-minted Ph.D.s as a means of institutional renewal. In rapidly changing fields, this renewal process plays an especially *vital* role.

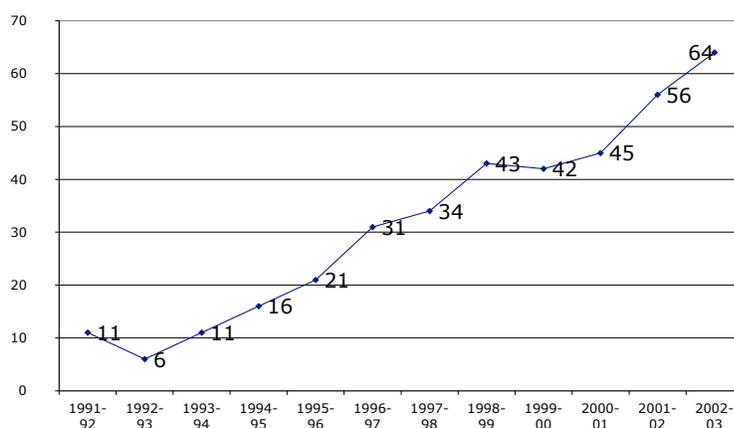
Because salaries are the dominant component of a university's budget and because the number of faculty of age sixty-five and higher was increasing quite rapidly (see figure), Cornell's response was to identify incentives to encourage faculty members to voluntarily surrender their legal right to remain on the payroll indefinitely. Although this figure could be extended to the current year, it is important to recognize that it is the impact on the salary pool, *not the number* of older faculty, that is important.

The "Phased Retirement" program was created to provide a finite time (up to five years) for the surrender of one's tenure in exchange for agreed upon benefits. Due to the working definition of "the problem", it was implicitly, and incorrectly, assumed that a faculty member must leave the university in order to secure a salary saving.

How you frame a problem has a profound impact upon the solutions that emerge as feasible. A very different remedy could have been realized had the question been framed as how to reclaim and to recycle salary funds, *but without necessarily asking faculty members to sever their active engagement with the university*. The older statement of the problem ignores the separability of a person and that person's salary. In other words, could some or all of a faculty member's salary be recycled without completely phasing out the person's engagement with the university? In my opinion, the approach taken overlooks the considerable benefits of having experienced faculty remain actively engaged. The older definition also overlooks the enormous value *to a faculty member* of an indefinite continuation of active involvement—even if at a lower overall level of activity or at a less comprehensive level of engagement with a person's increasing age—even if negotiated at a much lower salary. **Note:** This new rank should be an option, i.e., an individual's participation should not be obligatory.

In general, members of the Cornell faculty have a strong desire to remain engaged in university activities that bring them joy. In fact, I believe that many will even participate in activities – even with reduced or no compensation – if those activities engage some aspect of a person's passion. In contrast with the business world, there is no inherent need to have the faculty members "depart".

Age Profile
Total Faculty Aged >= 70



1 The complete removal of any mandatory age limit for tenured faculty in higher education became operational in 1994.

The older definition that led to phased retirement failed to recognize that faculty are paid in various ways, including psychological pay, e.g., having one's work valued and the person being respected and appreciated. I propose that we create a new title—**Senior Professor**. An analog of this exists in the federal judiciary; even the Graduate School Professor title, which might be subsumed, already implements an aspect of this title. The title of Senior Professor might be treated as an optional interim step in the transition to Emeritus Professor. There would be no need to forfeit academic freedom protections afforded by tenure (with the concomitant benefits to the university). The compensation for Senior Professor could be at a negotiated level, including even little or no compensation, but with, for example, some retirement and health benefits retained. The title of Senior Professor might be retained for a finite number of years if the faculty member participates at some mutually agreed upon level of engagement for some number of years until emeritus professor status becomes more appropriate.

Here are some potential attributes of a Senior Professor rank.

1. The purpose of this title would be to encourage faculty to remain intellectually involved with the university and to remain actively engaged for an extended period, but with a declining draw on the salary pool. Unlike "Phased retirement", the goal would not be to encourage an active separation, but to facilitate continuing engagement. Hence, success would not be measured by the number of persons who depart or remain, but by the benefits of continued engagement of the senior faculty and by whether the draw on the salary pool by the participating faculty is tapered down more quickly than otherwise would have occurred. Examples of uses of this title include participation in the Health Careers Evaluation Committee, continuing service on Special Committees for graduate students, participation in research grants, holding administrative assignments or even engaging in technology transfer of that faculty members research.
2. Access to this title would not be an entitlement, but would be negotiated. The qualification for emeritus status must be met (but not implemented) at the time this title is granted. The title would be a transitional title, i.e., a step between full professor and emeritus status. The title would be approved for five-year, renewable terms and would involve performance reviews, as is done for full professors. An agreed upon level of engagement (equivalent to the full-time equivalent concept) must be proposed when the title is requested. Engagement below the agreed upon level would be a basis for forfeiting the title and advancing to emeritus status.
3. A primary expectation will be that a person's salary will be diminished over time so the draw on the salary pool may be capped in order for the university to proceed with the hiring of new faculty. Arrangements for continuing health care and retirement benefits probably would be continued, but some base level of engagement may be required for this to happen.
4. This title should allow senior faculty to participate in entrepreneurial activities. However, a faculty member must have served at least ten (10) years as a tenure full professor (as required for promotion to emeritus status) in order to be considered for this title. This title should not allow the primary working obligation and loyalty of a faculty member to the university to be undermined.

Primary responsibility for assuring institutional self renewal rests with the Cornell University Trustees and the university administration. Adjusting the number of faculty has repercussions that persist for decades. Conse-

quently, the university deserves a very serious oversight effort that sets goals for what is expected to be sustainable in the long-term. There must also be a commitment to adhere to such a rational plan. Otherwise, the tenure system itself might be blamed if an unsustainable situation arises.

Surely I've not identified all the necessary conditions to make this work, but the fundamental issue is to find a way to enable interested faculty to continue their engagement with the university, while enabling some (or all) of their salary to be recycled in the interests of institutional self-renewal.

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