

State laws drive college professors toward exits

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Center for Public Integrity

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College professors once regarded Wisconsin as one of the safest places to work, with the right to be tenured baked into state law. Then, in 2015, the state removed that right and sent dozens of instructors running toward the exits.

Karma Chávez was among those departures from the University of

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Wisconsin, Madison. Like her, many of the people who left were people of color or queer. Chávez said she started looking for a job in another state immediately and landed at the University of Texas at Austin, where she chairs the Department of Mexican American and Latina/o Studies.

Now, as she watches Texas politicians chip away at tenure protections and academic freedom in that state, Chávez has realized "there's nowhere to run."

"When it comes to higher education, I don't know if there are any safe places," she said.

Texas, where a professor was suspended this year for criticizing the lieutenant governor in a lecture, is part of what many in the academic community say is an alarming, concerted attack on higher education spreading across the country.

Florida this year banned diversity programs and limited tenure that would, in part, protect college instructors from being fired for teaching controversial topics. Universities or state legislatures in Georgia, Iowa, North Carolina, South Carolina, Ohio, West Virginia and other states also have enacted or proposed laws and policies in the past two years that strike at the heart of academic freedom.

According to surveys of 4,250 instructors in Texas, Florida, Georgia and North Carolina released in September by the American Association of University Professors, two-thirds would not recommend their state as a desirable place for academic work, while a third said they planned to interview for jobs in other states in the coming year.

California, New York and Colorado — all states without tenure limits or laws restricting academic freedom — were listed as top destinations.

Another third said they did not plan to remain in academia long term. While salary was the top reason cited for their dissatisfaction, more than half the respondents also cited political climate and academic freedom.

Professors worry about what colleges and universities in these states will look like after an exodus of top instructors — and what that means for the economic, cultural and intellectual future of those states.

State Sen. Brandon Creighton — a Republican from the Houston suburbs who authored one Texas law banning diversity, equity and inclusion offices at Texas colleges and universities, and another law watering down faculty tenure — declined to answer questions about the bills or their potential effects.

Chávez said Texans should prepare for serious workforce changes that could hurt the state's economy.

Even a relatively small migration of top academics out of places such as Texas and Florida could have dire consequences for the economies of both the universities and the states. A university lab can bring in millions of dollars in grants and attract private companies to a college town. Any decline in innovation can equate to job losses for that town.

Professors in Georgia said a 2021 policy making it easier to fire tenured faculty at the University System of Georgia has already altered the feel of the state's campuses, and top talent has fled elsewhere. "I definitely have seen a lot of people leave in the past two years," said Brian Magerko, a professor of digital media at Georgia Tech. "Faculty are afraid. And that's part of the point here, to make people afraid to teach."

'Terrified' faculty

As a white, male, fully tenured professor, Magerko admitted he feels less at risk than colleagues of other races or genders —

who are more likely to be done right-wing targets, he said — or those who don't have tenure. And that difference is a huge part of the problem.

Top research universities are more likely to have tenured faculty than other institutions, but overall, more than 75% of college faculty are not tenured, according to the AAUP. That means that most instructors can be fired easily — especially women and people of color, who are less likely to hold tenure-track positions.

Non-tenured instructors help keep universities running, but "a lot of them are terrified," Chávez said. "It's hard because you don't know how things are going to be applied and you may not want to stick around to find out."

Colleges of all types have relied more heavily on adjunct and part-time faculty in recent years, and some have started looking into ways to better protect those instructors from political attacks — but most plans involve issuing written statements or rewriting faculty rights pledges, signaling support for those instructors rather than concrete actions.

That means more instructors than ever are at risk as states crack down on the teaching of what some lawmakers see as controversial topics.

"We need to be constantly vigilant about this," said Jim Klein, a history professor and faculty leader at Del Mar College, a community college in Corpus Christi, Texas. Politicians need to better understand the consequences of their actions, he said. "They're harming higher education, and higher education exists for the public good."

In Florida, Gov. Ron DeSantis this year overhauled the board of New College of Florida, a public liberal arts college with about 700 students and a progressive history, such as students receiving writing evaluations rather than grades. DeSantis appointed six new conservative trustees, who then led a dramatic transformation of the school. Diversity initiatives were canceled, the president was fired, and several professors were denied tenure.

The political tampering has driven away dozens of New College instructors — at least 40, according to news reports — and led to canceled classes that have made it more difficult for students to complete degrees.

The exodus has been a stunning, rapidly developing lesson for those who thought state politics would not affect where college instructors choose

to live and teach.

"If you would have asked me ahead of time, 'Is New College going to lose a lot of faculty because of this?' I would have said no," said Keith Whittington, a Princeton University politics professor who studies how politics affects college campuses. "Boy, I was wrong."

An AAUP report earlier this year concluded that the state's new laws "constitute a systematic effort to dictate and enforce conformity with a narrow and reactionary political and ideological agenda throughout the state's higher education system."

In their interviews with Florida instructors, association investigators were shocked by the strong emotional response.

"It's not until you sit down with people working in this environment and see their faces that you understand how horrible it is for them," said Afshan Jafar, a Connecticut College sociology professor who helped lead the AAUP team looking into what is happening in Florida.

Those effects will ripple through colleges and universities of all sizes and types, instructors at both two-year and four-year schools said, and in turn hurt communities of all kinds.

Shortchanging students

In Texas, the laws also have affected students, even if they don't realize it. Several Texas instructors said they or other faculty members have restructured their classes to avoid complaints from students who object to the discussion of controversial topics in the classroom.

At the University of Texas, Austin, student leaders have discussed the anti-diversity law daily, said Dana Sheinhaus, president of the Graduate Student Assembly. The body, elected by campus graduate students, is trying to gauge the possible effects of the new law, which takes effect Jan. 1.

The diversity and tenure laws "definitely instill fear in people," said Sheinhaus, a doctoral student in the pharmacology and toxicology department, and the university needs to find ways to keep that fear from scaring away top professors.

"If UT is one of the best research and teaching institutions, and I think we are, then we need to act like it," she said.

Drew Hynes, a classmate of Sheinhaus in the pharmacology and toxicology department, recalled that the anti-diversity law passed the day he interviewed for the graduate program. Hynes, who



Karma Chávez, chair of the Department of Mexican American and Latina/o Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, fears that laws that alter or remove tenure protections will harm higher education.
MONTIQUE MONROE FOR THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC INTEGRITY

plans to become a professor, said he asked about the law and felt reassured by the answers.

"It was really encouraging to hear some people on campus be so opposed to it," he said, adding that he was convinced the university would find other ways to protect diversity initiatives. "That helped quell any concerns I had."

But any student at a public college in Texas can drive fear among professors by invoking the new state laws and political climate and complaining about how professors teach about race, said Dale Rice, who teaches journalism at Texas A&M University and serves on the Faculty Senate.

"They've dropped their discussions of those types of topics," he said. "They don't want the hassle of dealing with that."

That self-censorship is "shortchanging students," said Andrew Klein, a Texas A&M geography professor and the former speaker of the campus Faculty Senate.

"In my view, that's kind of antithetical to everything a university is," he said. "A university should be a free flow of ideas. Students shouldn't not be presented with material just because they might feel it's offensive or disagreeable."

But recent experience shows instructors' fears may be well-founded.

A Texas A&M assistant professor, Joy Alonzo, was suspended last spring after a student accused her of insulting Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick in a routine lecture. The politically charged suspension, nearly unheard of in higher education, shocked academics across the country.

"If a professor in Texas can be suspended for saying something in class about the lieutenant governor, that means there are no protections for anybody," said Matthew Boedy, an associate professor of rhetoric and composition at the University of North Georgia and president of the state AAUP chapter.

"There are actually a lot of problems with the tenure system overall, but they're trying to create an implicit threat," said Yanni Loukissas, an associate professor of digital media at Georgia Tech. "We're being told, 'We don't really trust you even though you've gone through this very elaborate vetting process.' It's insulting."

That implicit threat stems from some lawmakers' feelings of weakness in the face of facts, said Chávez, the University of Texas professor.

"The hard thing is they're afraid of us for good reason," she said. "We tell the truth about American society, we tell the truth about power. And we do it in factual ways that are hard to argue against."

"That's not what people who come after higher education want to hear."

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