

## UT scientist: Killing tenure would ruin the state's research universities

March 24, 2023 | Houston Chronicle: Web Edition Articles (TX)

Author: Andrea C. Gore | Section: Opinion | 714 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

The 88th Texas legislative session is underway, with dozens of bills filed on public higher education. Several pose a threat to academic freedom, a professor's ability to pursue knowledge without external influences or pressure and to freely exchange ideas on campus. Academic freedom is essential to the best education for our students, the kind of education that teaches them to think critically and to listen and respect diverse opinions and perspectives.

I am an NIH-funded neuroscientist at UT-Austin. I am also a fierce advocate for academic freedom, and I feel confident saying that without academic freedom or its protection through tenure — basically, a long-term job appointment for faculty — Texas would not be the research powerhouse it is.

Texas public universities are among the top research institutions in the country and the world. In fact, our state has nine Tier 1 public research universities. Collectively, our Texas public universities bring in billions of research dollars each year and help support their campuses. For example, my lab is currently funded by a five-year \$4.25 million NIH research grant; some of those funds go towards university infrastructure.

At the University of Texas at Austin alone, research grants and contracts in 2020-21 added up to a staggering \$740 million. That's 22 percent of UT-Austin's budget — slightly more than the total that students pay in tuition each year, and more than twice what the state of Texas contributed to the university in general revenue.

What does that have to do with academic freedom and tenure?

It is precisely because of academic freedom and tenure that our great Texas universities are on the leading edge and are making leaps forward in the neurosciences, as well as the social sciences, humanities, arts, law, business — indeed, every discipline we teach. We need academic freedom to pursue research, identify the compelling gaps in knowledge in our specialty areas and the urgent questions we try to answer.

Tenure is hard to win. After years of work, a candidate for tenure must show excellence in teaching and scholarship and faces rigorous scrutiny by both internal and external peer reviewers.

Once tenured, faculty members have greater flexibility, time and job security. Tenure frees them up to explore new creative (and sometimes riskier) areas. Yet tenure is in jeopardy because of legislation currently under deliberation. In particular, the Senate Education Committee is reviewing SB 18, which would prevent any Texas public university from granting tenure to new faculty.

Big projects need the kind of stability conferred by tenure. Research takes time. Consider the work of Houston Nobel laureate James P. Allison, who received both bachelor's and doctorate degrees at The University of Texas at Austin, and is now a professor at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Dr. Allison made key discoveries about cancer and the immune system that led to a new field, immunotherapy, which has transformed the treatment of certain cancers. In some cases, tumors quite literally melt away and a patient becomes cancer-free. This astounding discovery was built on decades of prior research.

Those who oppose academic freedom imagine Texas' great universities as places where lazy tenured professors do nothing and say anything. But in fact, academic freedom and tenure come with great responsibility and accountability. At UT, each and every professor has their teaching, research and service reviewed every year. We are held to the highest standards and, when needed, told to make corrections.

As a UT professor, I am accountable to the citizens of the state of Texas, and I take my responsibility of producing the future generations of great thinkers and leaders seriously.

And I'm deeply concerned. What will Texas universities — and the state of Texas — look like if some of the proposed bills are enacted into law? Without tenure, and with restrictions on what content is or is not allowed to be taught and discussed on our campuses, the best and the brightest faculty — the research groundbreakers — will go to other states. Is that what we want for research in our state, and for Texas's students?

Andrea C. Gore, an NIH-funded neuroscientist, is a professor and Vacek Chair in pharmacology and professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. She is a member of the American Association of University Professors and vice president of the American Association of University Professors chapter at UT-Austin.

© Copyright 2023 Houston Chronicle. All rights reserved.

- **Citation (mla Style)**

Gore, Andrea C.. "UT scientist: Killing tenure would ruin the state's research universities."*Houston Chronicle: Web Edition Articles (TX)*, sec. Opinion, 24 Mar. 2023. *NewsBank: Access World News*, [https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc\\_dat=AWNB&req\\_dat=0FEF3B61F9E6E3DD&rft\\_val\\_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft\\_dat=document\\_id%3Anews/190783A32B18FD50](https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0FEF3B61F9E6E3DD&rft_val_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews/190783A32B18FD50). Accessed 26 Mar. 2023.