

Faculty Senate



M2026.2.24 Motion in Defense of Academic Freedom and Tenure

WHEREAS, tenure is integral to a Carnegie R1 research university's mission by enabling sustained, innovative scholarship; supporting high-quality research, teaching, and mentorship; and strengthening shared governance and institutional integrity; and

WHEREAS, tenure materially advances the University's ability to recruit and retain outstanding scholars by providing the professional stability necessary for long-range research planning, external funding, graduate and undergraduate mentorship, and interdisciplinary collaboration; and

WHEREAS, the University of Memphis's research activity contributes substantially to regional and statewide economic vitality, including documented research-related economic impacts in recent years; and

WHEREAS, experience in other states that have reduced faculty autonomy and security indicates increased faculty departures, challenges in recruiting high-performing researchers, and diminished research productivity among new hires;

WHEREAS, the "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure," endorsed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the American Association of University Professors, affirms that that higher education institutions should be organized around the common good, with the common good depending "upon the free search for truth and its free exposition;" and

WHEREAS, the University of Memphis Faculty Handbook states that academic freedom is essential to the free search for and exposition of truth and applies to participation in shared governance as well as teaching and research; and

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Faculty Senate affirms academic freedom and tenure as foundational to the University of Memphis's mission and opposes any efforts that would weaken tenure protections or erode academic freedom at the University of Memphis; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Faculty Senate approves the transmittal of the attached letter (Attachment A) to the President and Provost reaffirming the importance of tenure to the mission and functioning of the University of Memphis; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Faculty Senate invites other governing bodies of the University of Memphis to join it in releasing public statements in defense of academic freedom

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and tenure; and notes that faculty governance organizations across Tennessee may also wish to align messaging on these issues; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, that the Faculty Senate reaffirms its responsibility as a steward of the University's R1 mission and commits to defending tenure and academic freedom as essential conditions for high-quality research, innovative teaching, and the University's contribution to the economic and civic vitality of the region.

Originators:

Jeni Loftus, Faculty Senate President
DeAnna Owens-Mosby, Past-Faculty Senate President
Stephen Karr, Faculty Senate President-Elect
Bradley Dixon, Faculty Senate Parliamentarian
Barbara Fitzgerald, Faculty Senate Secretary
Shahram Pezeshk, Faculty Senate Executive Committee At-Large
Kate Sorensen, Faculty Senate Executive Committee At-Large
Stephanie Huette, Committee on Committees Chair
Mark Sunderman, Academic Support Chair
Gensheng Liu, Budget and Finance Committee Chair
Carl Hess, Library Policies Committee Chair
William Alexander, Research Policies Committee Chair
Katy Ramsey Mason, Senator
Micah Trapp, Senator
Jeffrey Scaba, Senator
Máté Wierdl, Senator
Elena Delavega, Senator
Earnestine Jenkins, Senator
Antonio de Velasco, Senator
Edith Gnanadass, Senator
Amy Rine Wake, Senator

Recipients:

Faculty Senate
Student Government Association (SGA)
Graduate Student Association (GSA)
Staff Senate

Motion Passed 02/24/2026
Vote: 28 For, 2 Against, 2 Abstain

Faculty Senate



The University of Memphis Alumni Association Board of Directors

The University of Memphis Board of Trustees

President Bill Hardgrave

Provost David Russomanno

Tennessee University Faculty Senates

Faculty Senate



Attachment A — Transmittal Letter

February 24th, 2026

President Bill Hardgrave
Provost David Russomanno
University of Memphis

Dear President Hardgrave and Provost Russomanno,

On behalf of the Faculty Senate, we write to reaffirm the faculty's strong support for tenure at the University of Memphis. Tenure is essential to the functioning of a Carnegie R1 research university and to the long-term vitality of our academic enterprise, as both of you have so eloquently stated in recent meetings with the Senate's Executive Committee.

The modern tenure system was created to ensure that faculty could conduct research and teach free from political, financial, or ideological pressures. This independence is the foundation of innovation, enabling scholars to pursue evidence wherever it leads, challenge established assumptions, and develop new knowledge that serves the public good. Tenure provides the stability needed for faculty to undertake ambitious, multiyear research agendas, develop novel methods, and pursue high-risk, high-reward ideas. It supports sustained research programs, steady mentorship of graduate students and postdoctoral scholars, and the ability to secure and manage external funding. This continuity is a primary driver of research impact, reputation, and competitiveness for major grants.

In addition, tenure protects the multitude of ideas that is fundamental to research universities. Academic discovery depends on faculty being able to pursue questions and viewpoints that may challenge conventional wisdom or address sensitive or emerging issues. A strong tenure system ensures that the University of Memphis remains a place where a wide range of scholarly perspectives can flourish, driving creativity and innovation across disciplines.

Tenure also strengthens our position in recruiting and retaining outstanding scholars. The national market for research-active faculty is highly competitive, and tenure remains a standard expectation at peer research universities. The most innovative researchers seek environments that support independent judgment and long-range scholarly planning. Tenure signals the University's commitment to that work. It is often decisive in attracting faculty who can launch new research centers, foster interdisciplinary collaborations, and bring national visibility to the University of Memphis.

Students benefit directly from a robust tenure system. Graduate students depend on steady mentorship throughout their training. Undergraduate students benefit from faculty who invest deeply in teaching, curricular stewardship, and undergraduate research and creative opportunities. Tenure supports the continuity required for these commitments to flourish.

Motion Passed 02/24/2026
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Tenure also enables faculty to establish deep, long-term relationships within the Memphis community and throughout Tennessee. These relationships, built over years of collaboration with schools, nonprofits, industry partners, and local governments, strengthen the University's role as a trusted anchor institution. Stable faculty appointments allow researchers and educators to invest in sustained community engaged scholarship, service, and outreach that contribute meaningfully to the social and economic health of the region.

Tenure also strengthens the economic vitality of the State of Tennessee. Research-intensive universities are engines of innovation, entrepreneurship, and workforce development, attracting new businesses and supporting the growth of high-skill industries. Stable, long-term faculty research programs generate discoveries that fuel technology transfer, partnerships with industry, and the creation of start-ups. These activities contribute substantially to regional and statewide economic growth, enhancing Tennessee's competitiveness and ensuring that the University of Memphis continues to play a central role in advancing economic opportunity for the citizens of our state. Eliminating or weakening tenure would put these economic contributions at risk. Research active faculty are the drivers of grant funding, technology transfer, startup formation, and workforce development. States that have reduced tenure protections have seen measurable declines in research productivity and increases in faculty departures, particularly among high performing-scholars¹. These losses translate directly into decreased grant revenue, fewer research supported jobs, reduced innovation pipelines, and diminished competitiveness for federal and industry partnerships. The economic costs of undermining tenure would be substantial for both the University and the State of Tennessee.

In addition to its academic contributions, the University of Memphis is a major economic engine for the city, region, and state². The 2025 Economic Impact Report shows that University operations generated nearly \$1 billion in economic activity in 2024, including \$547 million in direct operating costs and \$451 million in wages. Athletic programs added another \$165 million and drew nearly 500,000 out-of-town visitors, while the University's expanding research enterprise produced \$205 million in statewide economic impact following a record \$100 million in research funding. Together, these activities demonstrate the University's central role in strengthening Tennessee's workforce, driving innovation, and supporting long-term economic growth across the Mid-South.

Finally, tenure reinforces shared governance and academic integrity. Faculty can exercise professional judgment in curriculum, research policy, and standards of scholarship with the steadiness that complex institutions require. This strengthens decision-making and aligns our practices with those expected of leading research universities.

¹ Simon Quach & Zhengyi Yu, *Fight or Flight: How Restricting Faculty Autonomy Affects Productivity and Selection* (May 15, 2025), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5256572>.

² <https://preview.memphis.edu/president/communications/economic-impact.php>

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The Faculty Senate offers this statement in a spirit of collaboration and institutional stewardship. We believe tenure is foundational to the University of Memphis and central to our capacity for innovation, academic excellence, and service to our community. We look forward to continuing to work with University leadership to uphold these values and to advance the University's mission.

Respectfully submitted,
University of Memphis Faculty Senate