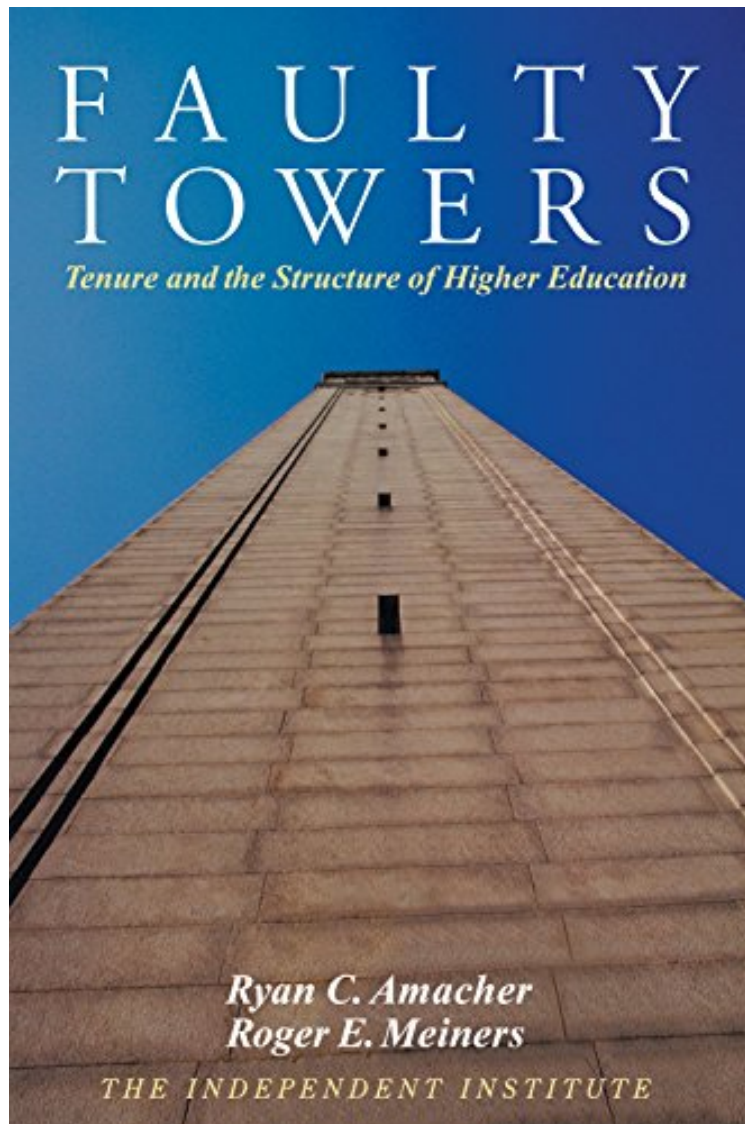


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Faulty Towers: Tenure and the Structure of Higher Education

Roger E. Meiners

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Roger E. Meiners : Faulty Towers: Tenure and the Structure of Higher Education before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Faulty Towers: Tenure and the Structure of Higher Education:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Bipolar but interesting book. By CustomerI will try to keep this review short in light of some longer reviews on here. To me, this book has something of a bipolar nature to it. I bought the book to learn a little bit more about the history of tenure. This is a very short book, but it does indeed have some interesting information on the history and perceptions of tenure, especially in the US. In this sense, the authors present some useful and thought-provoking ideas when trying to get a grasp on what tenure does and should mean.

Unfortunately, it seems as though there is an underlying anti-government, pro-voucher, pro-privatization current to the book that pops up every now and then and diverts attention away from a solid discussion of tenure towards what seems to be a more politically-motivated discussion on how to make education more efficient. While this does make the book thought-provoking in some ways, ultimately, the characterization of large state universities as being more decrepit and prone to stagnation than smaller private schools makes the whole argument seem suspect. Overall, I would recommend this book with the caveat that the reader should beware of some libertarian-leaning aspects to the argument.¹⁰ of 11 people found the following review helpful. Market Forces not the whole answer By Wanda B. Red This book brings an objective economic analysis to the incentive structure of higher education. To this extent, it marks a welcome intervention into the polarized current debate on the topic of tenure. The authors' (Amacher and Meiners) original insight is that tenure is not the problem, but rather the scapegoat for other defects in the incentive structure of a large bureaucratized system of higher education. The early chapters on the history of tenure are very informative; I for one did not know that its original purpose was less to safeguard academic freedom than to get rid of nonperforming junior faculty. Both authors have a background in the University of Texas system, so their focus is much more on the problems of large, highly bureaucratized systems than on private colleges and universities. Thus, the lessons of the book apply selectively. This book will be more useful to someone wishing to understand a large university system, with multiple campuses and subject to the oversight of Regents and ultimately a legislature, than to the reader interested in private schools. Finally, the authors want public universities to behave more like private ones, with vouchers that let students exercise their control as "consumers." This makes an interesting argument -- and after years in higher education I am also of the view that the incentive structure works against change and improvement. But this argument is not as "objective" as it pretends to be. Their bias against the shared governance procedures that characterize most institutions of higher learning is so extreme as to be a bit laughable. Any faculty, according to this analysis, who shoulder committee responsibilities are likely to be "below-average-quality faculty. . . . Competent faculty, who of course have the best job opportunities, have little desire to spend afternoons trapped in conference rooms with blowhards...." Okay, maybe there is some truth there, but there are other sides to such issues. The authors don't fully explore the ways in which universities are not the same as businesses. Yes, some business practices may help to reform higher education, but it will take more than the 95 pages of this slim book to come to grips with the asymmetries that must be acknowledged and understood to make such practices work in an academic environment. The chief gap in this analysis lies in the failure seriously to question the model of student as "consumer" or "client" and college as "merchant" or "vendor." Not only are colleges not "for profit" organizations; they also will not succeed simply by pleasing or catering to their students. That impulse is part of what has led to grade inflation and other abuses, which Amacher and Meiners mention but do not fully analyze. Also, academic programs should not be undertaken and terminated simply in response to market forces, as the authors imply. Part of the duty of higher education is to PRESERVE and EXTEND knowledge -- and I'd put a lot more emphasis on the "preserve" part than this book does. Consider what would happen to the Classics Department of any major university if the curriculum were formed simply on a market model (in response to what students want to take), and you will begin to see some of the problem. Are we willing to give up Virgil, Seneca, or Aristophanes forever because one generation of students (or even two or three) fails to find them beguiling? One more brief note: The appendix that lists all the legal appeals brought by fired faculty against their schools (1990-2003) makes for fascinating reading, though it's unclear what it means. Sure enough, there are fewer of such suits than one might imagine, and they almost always go against the plaintiff. I don't know, however, that these facts suggest that tenure is beside the point, as it's impossible to know what kind of legal landscape would exist in the absence of a tenure system. In sum, a worthwhile book -- and a quick read -- but not the answer it pretends to be.

Setting the record straight about the institution of academic tenure, this book elucidates its history, legal status, and common misunderstandings. Meiners argues that the original aim of tenure -- to ensure academic freedom and integrity -- can still be achieved and that the belief by many professors that tenure is a guarantee of lifelong entitlement, whereby only the commission of a crime can lead to dismissal, is wrong. He contends that as long as college administrators follow the rules of their own institution, there is little to prevent universities from dismissing tenured faculty who have become incompetent.

"A comprehensive and telling analysis of tenure issues . . . The well-argued and sound recommendations would result in better research and teaching." -- Herbert J. Walberg, emeritus research professor of education and psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago "A very sensible, balanced and informed book on the complex problems of governing colleges and universities." -- Nathan Glazer, professor of education and sociology, emeritus, Harvard University "Uncloaks the mystery of tenure. A must read for anyone interested in the very real problems of higher education." -- John W. Sommer, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, University of North Carolina, Charlotte; former dean, School of Social Sciences, University of Texas at Dallas "We must seriously reassess the rules that govern higher education. Amacher and Meiners are clear-headed guides for this endeavor." -- Donald J. Boudreaux, professor of

economics, George Mason University
About the Author
Roger Meiners is the Goolsby Distinguished Professor in the College of Business at the University of Texas at Arlington, where he teaches Legal Environment of Business.