

Random Samples

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USC Suit Gains Supporters

Six more members of the basic science faculty at the University of Southern California (USC) School of Medicine in Los Angeles have joined in a lawsuit claiming the university has breached the contracts of tenured professors with its salary-reduction plans (*Science*, 29 November 1996, [p. 1471](#)). Plaintiffs now number 23, about 60% of the tenured basic science faculty. Depositions began last week.

University officials, who have termed the suit "frivolous and irresponsible," say the medical school is in debt and needs restructuring. They have moved to reduce salaries by 25% by converting annual contracts from 12 months to 9 months.

Many professors' salaries are financed in part or in toto with grant money. If someone loses a grant, the university makes up the difference until more funding is obtained. New proposals, aired last month by medical school dean Stephen Ryan, could drastically reduce the university-guaranteed salary to 20% of the 12-month amount. The university then wants to supplement these salaries based on grants obtained or hours spent teaching. "Unlike their colleagues in nonresearch disciplines, basic science faculty have an excellent opportunity to earn back that salary reduction—and more—through research grants," it explained in a 7 January statement.

The litigants' Los Angeles lawyer, Jeffrey Kramer, argues that the proposals run "counter to academic freedom," and many in the medical school community agree. On 7 January, 43 professors sent a letter to the campus newspaper accusing university officials of being "deceitful" and showing "contempt for the principle of collegial governance" in their restructuring plan. Then on 13 January, the School of Medicine Graduate Students Association unanimously endorsed a declaration that "in its current form" the plan will chase away superior faculty, imperil teaching quality, damage the school's reputation, and "trivialize" tenure.

USC general counsel Bob Lane says the salary proposals aren't so bad, because professors would get the minimum only if they did no teaching and had no grants. But, he admits, "It's a very difficult time. ... Change is threatening."