Anyway, the discussion and the materials for the meeting led me to a concern that some people did voice insistently, i.e., with the task force decision to proceed piecemeal, rather than to try to deal with the across-the-board question about the class of instructors around the university who have no access to a professorial title. I thought I might just report to you about the global solution that I consider conceptually viable (obviously, that does not make it politically or institutionally viable).

My idea would deal straightforwardly with the problem emphasized by the provost in her remarks on the need for another title. It would do so by making the official, if not-too-often-used-in-routine-reference title of members of the tenure-track faculty "research professor," with the same three ranks we have now continuing to be possible, i.e., assistant research professor, associate research professor, and full research professor. We would then be able to appoint non-tenure-track faculty not only as lecturers and senior lecturers, but also as professors (assistant, associate and full professors) on term (this is the official phrase used at Yale, again not routinely, but in formal circumstances exemplified by appointment letters, published faculty lists, etc.), but without the contractual implication that is implied by the tenure track appointment, namely that the individual holding such an appointment must assume both a teaching obligation and a scholarly/research obligation. The immediate implication of this global strategy is that the vocabulary we would apply to full-time researchers would identify them as a group not belonging to the faculty, which must at minimum teach and advise, and which, for tenure-track status, must teach, advise, and do research. We would thus allow membership in three groups: teaching faculty, research faculty, and researchers. The tags I would suggest for full-time researchers are scholar and scientist. For the faculty in the Vet College, this general scheme would mean that those who might be given the title Clinical [assistant, associate, full] Professor would simply have the title Professor, and those appointed to tenure track would have (though rarely use) the formal status of [assistant, associate, full] Research Professors. The law school would then not have to go groping for an appropriate term to substitute for "clinical," and in the undergraduate colleges we would not be stuck with an incongruous term such as Professor-of-the-Practice, which at Harvard tends to connote something a bit dismissive, a status of "sub-Professor," as it were.

Now, a general scheme of this sort would obviously require a substantial redefinition of many titles within the existing set, but that could be worked out for faculty consideration by someone like Susan Giffen who is familiar with the bureaucratic requirements of our complex institution. The primary problem it would provoke for members of the faculty senate is the one that became central in yesterday’s debate—namely, the long-term fate of tenure and its justification on the basis of academic freedom. The secondary problem—a nomenclature not quite in synch with that of other universities—is one I’m convinced we could manage readily until they chose to follow our lead. In the near term, I think the institution of tenure is likely to be sustained by the major research universities, even if the substantive case for it looks problematic to some observers. Thus the question of consequence in the debate is whether the protections of academic freedom we accord to tenured faculty members are extended to
non-tenure-track faculty and to assistant professors on tenure-track appointments who have not yet received tenure. It’s quite obvious that, if the army of instructors who lack tenure also lack protection of their academic freedom, we have a serious problem and need to address it without regard for the distinctly less momentous question of titles.

Similarly, it is vitally important that the exercise of academic freedom be a right we extend to students. I have not thought very much about its relevance for staff, but I’m certain that there are staff people around the university who, by dint of the questions they address in their work, ought to have this protection, and there is cause to doubt that we should accord it selectively, rather than generally. In sum, the notion that protecting academic freedom in the institution rests upon the security of the tenured faculty is one that the evolution of research universities, which have expanded over the past half-century or more into the huge machines they now constitute by building up large corps of academics, researchers, and staffs around their tenured faculties, has rendered less and less persuasive. Free inquiry has to be protected by something more than just the tenure of a core group of faculty. Moreover, the notion emitted by Richard Baer according to which the tenure-protection is more important in sensitive areas like philosophy than in less sensitive areas like hard science is not sustainable: the history of threats to academic freedom shows that scientists and engineers are just as exposed as anyone and just as likely to have to speak out on controversial matters as their colleagues in other disciplines. The serious issue, in sum, is whether there is a compelling claim that tenured appointments in the research university for the privileged few are justified by the academic freedom they protect directly and concretely for those professors only: in other words, does the present structure really work so that tenure indirectly protects academic freedom for the whole university community? If that’s in doubt, should we be working to extend tenure to more people (the Lieberwitz position, to the extent that I understand it) or to develop new forms of protection?

In any case, as dean of Arts and Sciences, I am inclined to advocate for the foreseeable future both a principle that most members of the Senate seem to want to uphold and a secondary one that involves the faculty’s commitments to educating students:

1. We should design our educational enterprise so as to maintain the full complement of tenurable faculty positions we now have in place (i.e., disallow the erosion of the tenured faculty corps by keeping this group at full strength and limiting the number of appointments and the fraction of teaching that can be done by non-research faculty)

2. We should emphasize the teaching mission of research faculty and disallow the para-professional development of a secondary faculty that would relieve tenured faculty members of their primary teaching responsibility and allow them to devote most of their effort to research.

This means that, while it’s important to have managerial flexibility, to be sure, and to be able to use faculty who specialize in teaching productively, it’s also vitally important to be able to say to alumni and parents that our senior research faculty members are still participating actively in teaching undergraduates. The argument about tenure that
should come into play here is that the pursuit of research and scholarship is what takes the faculty member into the consideration of precisely the discoveries and questions that are likely to result in controversial propositions we need to be able to voice fearlessly. Research generates the imperative to protect academic freedom, and academic tenure is merely an institutional mechanism (symbolic capital) serving as the ultimately inviolable security for it, in the same way that gold kept in a vault ideally secures the dollar. In reality, the dollar is secured much more vitally by the vigilant institutional regulation carried out by the federal reserve system, and the university must have its equivalent of that in order to ensure academic freedom strongly, i.e., by harboring the interaction of multiple and conflicting views.