

TENURE: OBSERVATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

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INTRODUCTION

Tenure for college and university faculty members at small to mid-size institutions has long been a topic that has been hotly debated. Traditionally these institutions had mainly a teaching focus. In the early years tenure might have been awarded after a probationary period of five or six years and announced simply by a letter in the mail. However, since faculty abilities and interests vary widely, it was not uncommon for some faculty who were moderately or heavily involved in teaching to also produce some significant research results. Natural curiosity, student interests, capstone projects, or monetary necessity might have been the driving motivations. Many faculty members and administrators at such institutions were aware of the advantages of producing research results simply by observing the work of their peers at larger, research-oriented universities. As the years went by, the standards of these institutions were admired and gradually were put in place, at least partially, at the mid-size institutions. This might have been done simply in the name of “progress.” It might also have been done to enhance the careers of faculty at the smaller institutions and to increase their mobility. Research accomplishments and notoriety also improved the prestige of an institution. This, it seems, has also led to public recognition or acceptance of the importance of faculty research as a measure of institutional quality, especially by students and parents involved in the choice of an institution for undergraduate studies. At the same, in the United States, many applicants are available for each faculty opening. These factors have come together to increase expectations for faculty performance and the development of elaborate criteria for choosing an applicant and for the subsequent award of tenure. Measured in terms of teaching, research, and service, these expectations are rapidly becoming common throughout the educational world. These standards determine the working environment and even the lifestyle of college and university faculty members today.

There are some very important issues regarding tenure which really should be subjects of separate studies. The first is whether or not we should have tenure in our institutions at all. The second is the issue of the relationship between tenure and diversity in faculty hiring and retention. Both of these topics are worthy of extensive study and discussion, but we will reserve this for another occasion.

STANDARDS FOR TENURE

Tenure means different things to different institutions and faculty depending on their mission and history. If we model tenure in three institutional dimensions--type, location, and age—we witness a wide range of perspectives. Fundamentally, tenure can be viewed as a license to teach at a particular institution. Without tenure, the instructor's time at the institution is limited.

Tenure is rooted in the belief in academic freedom. The instructor worthy of tenure will be protected from prejudice through a guarantee of job security. The professor's academic and professional standing including professional integrity merits tenure.

For some institutions, especially in prior decades, achievement of tenure occurred through adequate performance of assigned teaching duties and was indicated to the instructor without the necessity for any formal application. At the other extreme, the modern research university has a comprehensive standard of intellectual production stretching from research through teaching to service.

INSTITUTIONAL PROCEDURES

Today evaluation for tenure might involve processing through three or more administrative levels and two or more faculty levels. Ideally these two lines of evaluation would be independent, allowing for a variety of viewpoints to be considered. Administratively, the unit chair evaluates the candidate, perhaps using some faculty input, and then forwards a recommendation regarding promotion or tenure to the dean (or director). The unit chair and the dean must be cognizant of unit, college (or school), and institutional promotion and tenure regulations and make recommendations that are consistent. Faculty committees at the unit, college, and institutional levels will bring a variety of perspectives, but all must be aware of expectations from different entities. Finally, the university provost (or academic vice president, chancellor) receives the administrative and faculty recommendations and makes the final decision. In the final analysis, the provost decides whether or not the candidate represents the type of faculty member who will serve the long-term needs of the institution.

A typical probationary period for tenure and promotion is six years. For subsequent promotion there is disagreement. Five years is a commonly considered minimum, but 10 years wouldn't be unusual. For tenure, the institution usually has standards for teaching effectiveness, research productivity (stable external funding, consistent publication record), and service (to the institution, to the profession, and to the community). Problems come when the various administrators and faculty committees have different interpretations of the standards set in institutional regulations.

CANDIDATE PERSPECTIVE

Several things might contribute to a lack of interest in an academic career: the long probationary period, low salary, high workload, and financial insecurities of an academic institution. On the other hand, some might choose such a career anyway, perhaps for the following reasons: (1) the chance to participate in a research community or a community devoted to learning,

(2) appropriate intellectual gifts for such work, which makes such a career actually a liberating experience, (3) the college or university environment being the best opportunity for using one's education, (4) the prestige of a university position, and (5) the opportunity to serve students.

Even though we might agree that an academic position is desirable, earning the Ph.D. degree doesn't guarantee a job offer. So, anyone interested in an academic position is risking perhaps three or more years of life beyond the bachelor's degree. Some fields might require work experience in the profession or post-doctoral studies. If the position is obtained, tenure will be either earned or denied. So, conceivably after about 10 years of study and work the individual might have failed in the pursuit of an academic career and some major or minor career change could be necessary. A negative aspect of pursuing a Ph.D. is that, if a teaching position is not available, having the Ph.D. degree might in some cases reduce employment opportunities. In the case of a traditional engineering position, the candidate might be viewed as being overqualified or too expensive.

THE CANDIDATE: TENURE REALITIES

Here we take the liberty of offering some advice to the tenure candidate. The suggestions below emphasize the candidate's perspective while providing useful information for evaluators. Policy variations from one institution to another can be significant. The comments presented below are general observations about the process that won't fit everyone's situation.

1. **Application for Tenure.** It is important for the department chair, department promotion, tenure, and evaluation (PTE) committee, and the dean to closely follow the candidate's career progress. Correspondingly, the candidate benefits if the unit and the college have carefully and thoughtfully written PTE documents that measure up to current institutional standards. Some institutions require an early review (third or fourth year) that should be taken very seriously. There could be an informal conversation with the chair, dean, and provost two years ahead of the planned tenure application. This should certainly happen at least with the unit chair. Some institutions require candidates to include external review letters in their dossiers. The candidate should carefully follow the institutional guidelines as to format and content of the dossier or application. Hopefully, portfolios used by successful candidates will be available for inspection by current candidates.

2. **Position Description.** Each candidate usually has an individual appointment letter and/or job description that should be consulted along with the PTE documents of the individual's department and college. The candidate should do quality work in quantity that is roughly equivalent to the job description (for example, research, teaching, and service percentages of 40, 40, and 20, respectively). The candidate should strive to perform at an excellent level in all three areas. Under no circumstances should research be neglected.

3. **Evaluation by Peers and Administrators.** We suggest that candidates not apply for early tenure or promotion unless they are clearly outstanding. At every level of evaluation almost everyone compares current candidates with those people she/he considers to be at about the same point in their career. A marginal evaluation at a lower level might not mean that the candidate will be denied tenure/promotion at the provost level.

4. **Research.** Candidates should develop their own research programs. It should be recognizable as a research effort at the candidate's current institution. The candidate should continue doing some publishing in their original area of expertise even if they are forging ahead in a new research area at their current institution. Journal publications still are the key factor (for some institutions, one [good] or two [better] per year). Most evaluators still don't appreciate the value of an acceptance of a paper at a prestigious conference. The "bar" is moving higher. There are some senior faculty members that suggest that we evaluate not only the quality of the journals in which we publish, but also the impact of the publications and the number of citations. As is discussed below, external funding really helps. It is growing in importance and might be a requirement at some institutions.

5. **Grants and Contracts.** A significant factor in promoting research productivity is the candidate's ability to attract research support through grants and contracts and, correspondingly, to support research assistants (RA's). Without RA's, young faculty in search of tenure will have their chances of publishing limited. Faculty at mid-size institutions typically will be assigned few or no RA's (or even teaching assistants) as compared to faculty at large research universities. This problem is partially addressed by the National Science Foundation's Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR). This leads to the issue of "stimulus" or "start-up" packages. In some institutions, and in some high-demand areas (chemical engineering, for example), these packages can amount to several hundred thousand dollars or more. In a non-EPSCoR state, smaller institutions are at a disadvantage. Hopefully NSF and other government agencies will develop programs that address this issue (start-up packages) in lieu of or in addition to the programs they already have in place to help the most talented young faculty.

6. **Teaching.** Candidates should include at least two peer reviews of teaching in their portfolios. They should report on advising effectiveness (prospective students, undergraduate and graduate students, and student organizations) along with teaching effectiveness. The tenure process is ultimately for the benefit of our students since faculty research adds to the quality and prestige of the institution. Students' careers will be significantly impacted by the public's perception of the institution.

7. **Service.** Aside from institutional expectations, the candidate should be involved in at least one professional society. To serve at the national committee level is a worthy goal. This brings recognition to the candidate's institution.

8. **Collegiality.** Tenure itself is no guarantee of long-term career security. Conflicts with administrators or colleagues might lead to a future resignation. To survive or thrive, the candidate must be gifted with intelligence, energy, an excellent work ethic, and the people skills required to be effective with students, faculty colleagues, and administrators. Some today refer to these people skills with the term collegiality (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 1999; Connell & Savage, 2001). In recent years there has been some effort to include collegiality in institutional promotion and tenure documents, although this has not achieved the status traditionally given to research, teaching, and service. Although the AAUP (1999) is troubled by the effort to include collegiality as a part of the faculty evaluation process, the courts

(Connell & Savage, 2001) have consistently upheld the right of an institution to use collegiality as a significant factor in the evaluation process. The candidate should be aware of this since many administrators have been through situations in which lack of collegiality by certain faculty members was detrimental to unit productivity.

THE CANDIDATE: MAINTAINING MOBILITY

The candidate should not limit himself/herself to fulfilling the minimum criteria for tenure (or promotion), but should always try to go beyond this. The main reason is mobility: with the minimum, one can only move laterally, or downward, not upward. Institutions usually recognize tenure from other institutions when they are “higher” in prestige or reputation. But there are many circumstances in which a relatively young and brilliant faculty member wants to move to another place which has higher standards. That will not be possible unless he/she has exceeded the requirements of the current institution. This would also be true in the case of someone wishing to be an administrator.

FACULTY COMMITTEES AND ADMINISTRATORS: TENURE DECISIONS

Members of faculty promotion and tenure committees and unit administrators have the difficult task of evaluating the performance of the tenure-track faculty member and predicting the candidate’s long-term success at the institution. The tenure process is based on an underlying assumption that the behaviors learned during graduate studies and continued and improved during the tenure process will lead to a lifetime of scholarly work that will bring benefits to the institution and her students. From the perspective of the institution and its constituency, tenure involves something like a 25- to 40-year commitment. If you set an average salary for engineering faculty at one hundred thousand dollars plus overhead, that is a commitment of about five million dollars or more by the institution and its constituency. Often the constituency is the State, and it is the taxpayers’ money, so that cannot be taken lightly.

The advice to the candidate given above reflects the expectations commonly held by faculty promotion and tenure committee members and unit administrators. Correspondingly, evaluators have the obligation to do a fair and balanced evaluation of each candidate in each area of performance mentioned or hinted at in the above list.

A difficulty with earlier reviews (or even annual reviews), which in many institutions are mandatory, is that candidates generally don’t like criticism. The candidate’s response might be essentially defensive. The review then produces few useful results for the candidate’s career and might even generate a lawsuit against the institution or its administrators. This points out how important it is to clearly inform prospective faculty members about the nature of the institutional evaluation process. This should also be part of new faculty orientation. At some institutions this is dealt with through faculty mentoring programs.

A joint project of the American Council on Education (ACE), the American Association of University Professors, and United Educators Insurance Risk Retention Group produced the document *Good Practice in Tenure Evaluation: Advice for Tenured Faculty, Department Chairs, and Academic Administrators* (2000). This report has four main sections. Chapter 1

calls for developing and maintain clear standards and procedures for tenure evaluation. Chapters 2 and 3 call for consistency and candor in tenure decisions and evaluation. A final chapter deals with the difficult task of caring for unsuccessful candidates. The summary at the beginning of the report is must reading for all involved, and the entire report should be helpful to anyone who is concerned about the legal aspects of the tenure evaluation process.

A practical concern suggested by the ACE document is the importance of faculty and administrators being well versed in existing and approved institutional policies or regulations concerning the tenure process. Since faculty committee membership is subject to a continuing rotation, it is important that senior faculty members of such committees make an extra effort to provide what we might call an institutional memory of how tenure evaluation has and does occur. The evaluation process will change over the years, but this change should be gradual enough so that the results in the short term don't indicate inconsistency. Administrators are perhaps in a better position to encourage consistency since usually they hold their posts much longer than do faculty members of tenure committees.

The ACE document further encourages those involved in evaluations to provide clear explanations of tenure requirements and correspondingly clear advice about how to meet tenure requirements. For example, a given academic unit might have a very specific requirement understood within the unit but not specified in the unit regulation. Such a situation could easily lead to confusion and possibly to legal problems for the institution.

SPECIAL PROBLEMS

Given the tenure picture described thus far, we must also admit that there are valuable faculty colleagues that don't measure up to the standards we have suggested. This might be true early in their careers, at mid career, or in their final years. The common model at a research university is that the standards established during the tenure period continue throughout the faculty member's career. Some institutions might find it difficult to hire and maintain on staff such model faculty. In some units there have been informal arrangements among collegial faculty members to hire and maintain faculty with a variety of gifts. Gifted teachers would be used as teachers. Great researchers would be given reduced teaching loads. Those with gifts of service would focus on service. All faculty members contribute to carrying the workload in the department to the best of their abilities. However, as institutional standards develop, at many institutions it has gradually become difficult to deal with the unit workload in this manner. This could be viewed as an erosion of unit autonomy. Some institutions have what are essentially per-faculty production quotas that work in favor of building units where the expectation is that each faculty member will be equally productive in all areas. Some units have dealt with this, if budgets allow, by hiring faculty with specific titles such as senior lecturer or professor of practice. These categories of faculty are outside of the tenure track. This development suggests that in future decades we can expect that faculty members who have essentially a teaching-only role will not have tenure.

A related situation exists for an institution that either is not strong in research or is committed only to teaching. A compromise should exist to save those exceptional teachers who are not that enthused (or stimulated) about research. Such institutions might give tenure to outstanding

teachers or they might award long-term contracts (five years or more) in the categories mentioned earlier: senior lecturer or professor of practice.

CONCLUSION

There is much uncertainty for the person who desires an academic career. As noted above, progress towards tenure might involve an investment of a significant portion of an individual's life, and might, for one reason or another, lead to having to make a second career choice. For the successful candidate, we must assume that a great deal of pride and satisfaction comes with the award of tenure and having a lifetime career as a professor.

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