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A Creature of Our Own Making

By GARY A. OLSON

HEADS UPAdvice for
academic
administrators

At this time of year, most institutions are completing their annual tenure and promotion cycles. Assistant professors are receiving letters congratulating them or, in some cases, informing them that they have to start looking for a new job. Undoubtedly, a collective sigh of relief will resound as another faculty cohort finally emerges from the dark years of anxiety on the track toward tenure.

Those six or seven probationary years seem fraught with worry. Untenured professors, regardless of their accomplishments, seem uniformly terrified until they hold in their hands that official letter conferring tenure. I have even known colleagues who had received congratulatory letters from both the provost and president but who refused to stop living in dread until they had received confirmation of their appointment from their university's trustees.

The pretenure years should be a time of excitement, growth, and professional maturation -- not anxiety, stress, and fear. Faculty members deserve a culture of support, not neglect, during those crucial formative years, and institutions bear much of the responsibility for creating one.

It's not enough just to articulate and disseminate the university's tenure requirements, although that's a good first step. Institutions should establish programs for junior faculty members that demystify the process and midprobationary tenure reviews that provide a comprehensive assessment of an individual's progress. They should also reassess the entire process periodically.

In fact, many institutions are examining their tenure processes and standards in light of a growing realization that the traditional tenure system is unnecessarily rigid:

- Some colleges are making policy changes to accommodate dual-career families raising children during the peak of their pretenure years, or single parents attempting to balance family life and progress toward tenure.
- Some institutions are offering alternative tenure clocks rather than forcing all faculty members through the same inflexible system.
- Others are providing opportunities to choose different ratios of teaching to research on which they will be evaluated.
- Not only has the Modern Language Association recommended a major overhaul of tenure standards, but even Yale University -- that perennial bastion of high standards -- is considering liberalizing its notoriously rigid system.

Institutions themselves can be a major cause of pretenure anxiety when they get bogged down in the

specifics and lose sight of the big picture. Too often, a tenure committee will be so preoccupied with counting -- numbers of published pages, publications, citations, and so on -- that it forgets to ask the larger questions.

I've witnessed, for example, several departments' attempts to devise rankings of academic journals and university presses so as to introduce some measure of certainty and consistency to the decision-making process. Such attempts invariably fail because rarely will a given group of faculty members be able to arrive at a consensus over such ratings except, perhaps, of the most and least prestigious venues.

Whatever the institution's specific criteria, the tenure process is really about (or should be) making an assessment of the extent and quality of an individual's contribution to the institution and discipline, and the likelihood that that contribution will continue or even increase.

Certainly, numbers and rankings should play a role, but committees and administrators should also be making a holistic assessment of the candidate. Is the person a "good citizen" of both the department and the larger institution? Has the candidate demonstrated a consistent record of excellent teaching? Are both of those records likely to continue?

Critically important: Is the candidate "a player" in the discipline? Does he or she contribute regularly to the intellectual life of the discipline through research and service? Will the candidate continue to contribute and thereby bring distinction to the institution? (I suppose the ideal would be to have a faculty in which everyone is an award winner: Nobel Prizes, Pulitzers, Fields Medals, and the like.)

But more important than raw numbers is the record as a whole. And the profile of an "active contributor" will differ from discipline to discipline. Tenure candidates in audiology will look quite different from ones in chemistry. Audiologists would be expected to invest a substantial amount of time in clinical practice and supervision but not to produce the quantity of published research of the chemists, not to mention the number of external grants. So while numbers do tell us something, they are relative and paint a partial picture.

Administrators -- especially deans and department heads -- bear the greatest share of the burden in creating a culture of support.

First, we need to accept responsibility for keeping all faculty members well informed about tenure requirements and expectations. We need to guide young scholars, providing them with concrete strategies for satisfying those requirements and expectations, and monitoring their progress on an annual basis.

Perhaps as important, department heads themselves often need to be guided. I have witnessed numerous instances in which chairs ignored pretenured faculty members until right before they were set to apply for tenure. I've seen other chairs allow weak cases to go forward when they could have requested a one-year extension to give the candidate more time to strengthen the case.

In both scenarios, the department heads were negligent. Their role is to shepherd untenured faculty members through the entire process -- not to wait on the sidelines as a detached observer.

That being said, they also need to exercise leadership. Recently, a fellow dean of arts and sciences complained to me about one of her department heads who had failed to make a hard decision in a tenure case. Although the candidate's record was appallingly deficient, the chairman wrote a glowing letter of support.

"He had absolutely no backbone," she told me. "He simply avoided all responsibility and sent the case forward to me and to the college tenure committee so that we would relieve him of the discomfort of making a hard decision. That's not leadership; it's cowardice!"

Leadership involves making every effort to help new scholars become successful, but it also entails exercising the courage to withdraw that support if, at the end of the day, a faculty member has not met the grade. Supporting an unworthy case erodes the department's credibility with the dean, the college committee, and the provost, thereby jeopardizing future cases.

Most important, it is manifestly unfair to those faculty members who worked hard, played by the rules, and produced a record consistent with institutional expectations.

I want to make it clear: I believe that numbers do matter. They provide a sense of accountability as well as consistency from case to case. But the enumeration of specific accomplishments should be balanced with a more general assessment of the candidate's contribution. We need both types of assessment.

The tenure system is a creature of our own making. It can be flexible, supple, and responsive to the diverse needs and life situations of faculty members, or it can be rigid, uncompromising, and so focused on the trees that it cannot see the forest.

The pretenure years need not be a time of high anxiety, but for that to happen, institutions will need to make structural changes in the tenure system. We will need to learn to ask of every tenure candidate, "Are you a player?"

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