

TENURE AND PROMOTION STANDARDS: THAT WAS THEN; THIS IS NOW

Thomas Miller
University of Memphis

Dr. Bill Merrill and Dr. Laura Penley, both assistant professors at Regency State University, were conversing at lunch about the Faculty Personnel Committee's expected changes in the College's tenure and promotion policies. With the University's aspiration of becoming a major research institution, it was expected that the Personnel Committee would be raising the requirements for faculty to achieve tenure and promotion, especially in the area of research and publication. As untenured faculty who would soon be seeking tenure and promotion to associate professor, they were concerned since this change could significantly affect their future.

A few weeks later, the Personnel Committee released its recommendations which, indeed, did increase the requirements for tenure and promotion. The proposed changes were reviewed by the Dean and subsequently approved by a vote of the faculty. However, a critical issue with major implications for the junior faculty was how and when the new standards would take effect: immediately, next year, or at some later time? With this sensitive issue yet to be resolved, the Personnel Committee was reconvened and charged with recommending a plan for implementation of the new policy.

THE ANXIOUS LUNCH

Dr. Bill Merrill, assistant professor of management, was having a quick lunch in the deli near the business school with his faculty colleague and friend, Dr. Laura Penley. Penley was also an assistant professor who joined the management faculty with Merrill three years earlier. Merrill was relating what he recently heard about the College Faculty Personnel Committee, a standing committee which was in the process of reviewing and revising the College tenure and promotion policies.

“Well, I am concerned about what the Faculty Personnel Committee will come up with, and how it's going to affect us. We both got pretty good Mid-tenure Reviews by the College, but I know that they are going to change the requirements for tenure and promotion based on the University's push to become a major research

university. And you recall at the last College faculty meeting, the Dean emphasized that the faculty needed to have a higher research profile to elevate the stature of the College. I knew that scholarship and publishing would be important for me to get tenure here, but it sounds like the screws are tightening down. Research has become the biggest piece in the puzzle.”

Penley nodded and responded. “Yes, and that was a major topic of conversation on the ride to Atlanta last week when we went to that online teaching conference. I rode over with Alex Mathis and Fred Tillman in the Marketing Department. They both come up for tenure and promotion a year before we do, and they are concerned. Of course, any changes in the tenure policy will hit them before us.”

Merrill continued. “I know that we’ll be moving to more of a bean-counting approach for the number of journal publications in this or that journal. I am sure you remember that arduous process we went through two years ago with the management faculty rating the publications, winding up with the list of A+, A, B, and C journals.”

“Oh, yes, that’s not easy to forget,” replied Penley, “with all the controversies about the good and the excellent journals, and that dispute over whether the *Journal of General Management* should count as an A+ or A publication. I thought that Christine Blakely was going to explode when the committee rated it an A!”

“She was passionate about that, wasn’t she? Merrill agreed. “I think the new publication requirements will be more rigid, at least that’s what I am hearing.” Sighing, he continued, “When we came here, the policy had some flexibility on the research requirements with the language about needing to have about an average of at least an article a year with most of them in A+, A, and B categories. I am sure this will get tighter. And another question is when these will go into effect – next year, two years hence? Surely, they won’t be just dropped on us tomorrow.”

Penley picked up her keys to leave. “Well, I certainly hope not ‘because that could be a real problem. Have to run now, Bill. Need to get ready for my org behavior class at 1:45.”

FACULTY TENURE

Faculty tenure has a lengthy and controversial history. The fundamental purpose of tenure is to protect academic freedom which is seen by tenure advocates as essential to the core role of faculty who teach and conduct research in higher education. Faculty, it is argued, need to have the intellectual autonomy to openly dissent from prevailing opinion, disagree with conventional authorities, and pursue unconventional topics in fulfilling their role in teaching and research. The

foundation of tenure in the United States and Canada can be traced to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), formed in 1915 as an advocate for academic freedom. The AAUP's 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* is a foundation document of justification for tenure that has been widely adopted and is highly influential in higher education, a portion of which is excerpted below:

The purpose of this statement is to promote public understanding and support of academic freedom and tenure and agreement upon procedures to ensure them in colleges and universities. Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition.

Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth. Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning. It carries with it duties correlative with rights.

Tenure is a means to certain ends; specifically: (1) freedom of teaching and research and of extramural activities, and (2) a sufficient degree of economic security to make the profession attractive to men and women of ability. Freedom and economic security, hence, tenure, are indispensable to the success of an institution in fulfilling its obligations to its students and to society.

In order to protect the academic freedom of the faculty member, the AAUP statement held that after the expiration of a probationary period, faculty members should have permanent employment until retirement, subject to termination only for adequate cause, financial exigency, or curricular reasons. Tenure essentially removes probationary faculty members from the "at-will" employment category where they can be easily terminated.

Opponents of tenure argue that the traditional tenure system that offers nearly guaranteed job security has numerous flaws. They claim that it protects ineffective or even incompetent faculty members, promotes faculty complacency, limits institutional flexibility, and saddles the institution with costs. Although the tenure system remains in place at most colleges and universities, the percentage of tenured faculty has declined significantly as many institutions in recent years have tenured

fewer faculty, reduced tenure-track positions, and hired more term-appointed and adjunct (part-time) faculty.

Given the job and economic security provided by a tenured appointment, the value of tenure is apparent. The motivation of junior faculty to achieve tenure is understandably strong, especially as tenured appointments have become scarcer in colleges and universities. Many schools are moving to more term contracts (e.g., three years) that are subject to renewal and afford the institution more staffing flexibility.

TENURE AND PROMOTION AT REGENCY STATE

Like most universities, Regency State had developed policies governing tenure and promotion of its faculty. The University-level statements were fairly general with more specific requirements developed by the colleges and departments. In some cases, colleges had policy statements, e.g., Arts and Sciences, and then departments within them had more specific guidelines for their faculty, such as English, mathematics, and foreign languages. However, the College of Business was more homogeneous and had traditionally operated with one policy statement that governed all departments within it (accounting, economics, finance, information systems, management, and marketing).

Faculty members at Regency State were assigned activities in the areas of teaching, research, and service, depending on their role in the University. Within the College of Business, tenure-track faculty carried a teaching load of two three-credit courses per semester, or a total of 12 hours for the academic year. In exchange for this reduced teaching load, tenure-track faculty were expected to conduct and publish research in respected journals as a key component of their role. In contrast, non-tenure-track instructors normally taught four three-credit courses or 24 hours for the two semesters and were not expected to be heavily engaged in research.

Each department chairman evaluated faculty members' performance annually based on their activities and accomplishments in teaching, research, and service. In addition to the annual reviews, a more extensive evaluation of tenure-track faculty was completed by the College late in the third year of one's appointment, the Mid-tenure Review, which assessed the overall progress of the faculty member in meeting tenure requirements. If the results were generally positive, the faculty member's annual contracts would be continued.

The tenure and promotion policies and procedures described the detailed and lengthy application and review process. In general, advancement in an academic rank required at least five years of appropriate professional experience, thus one would normally serve at least five years as an assistant professor before being

eligible for application to associate professor rank. Like many universities across the country, the professional requirements for tenure at Regency State were the same as that for promotion to associate professor. For a new Ph.D. joining the faculty, tenure and promotion to associate professor went hand-in-hand (exceptions might be made for one who came to the University with several years of experience following completion of the doctorate). An assistant professor would make application for tenure and promotion to associate professor at the beginning of the sixth year of employment (after five years of service). If the nearly year-long process of reviews at the department, college, and university levels were favorable, tenure and promotion would be awarded at the beginning of the seventh year. If one were not approved for tenure and promotion, then he/she received a one-year, terminal contract for the seventh year. Thus, the University had an “up-or-out” system.

Once promoted to associate professor and tenured, a high-performing faculty member could expect to apply for promotion to the professor rank after at least five additional years of service and significant professional accomplishment. Some associate professors would take longer to meet requirements for professor, and others would conclude their careers at the associate professor rank.

Although the rather elaborate process for promotion and tenure covered many issues, most of the faculty attention focused on the requirements for tenure or advancement in rank. An excerpt of the College of Business’s policy statement is below:

The awarding of tenure is recognition of the merit of the faculty member that he or she meets the long-term staffing needs of the College and institution. It is only awarded to those members of the faculty who have exhibited professional excellence and outstanding abilities sufficient to demonstrate that their future services and performances justify the degree of permanence afforded by academic tenure. Consistent with University policy, in addition to the performance review, the administrative assessment of need, enrollment trends, financial resources, rank distribution, and other such matters may be considered at the University level in the final recommendation to promote or tenure.

Promotion from one academic rank to a higher one is recognition of an individual’s achievement and an expression of confidence that the individual is capable of assuming additional responsibilities and demonstrating greater accomplishments. The policy of the College

is to recommend promotion objectively, equitably, and impartially on the basis of merit.

THE REVISED STANDARDS

As provided in the College governance documents, policy matters related to faculty personnel issues were referred to the Faculty Personnel Committee. Membership of the Committee included one elected representative from each of the six academic departments in the College and the Associate Dean who served as an ex-officio member.

About three weeks after Merrill and Penley's lunch, the Faculty Personnel Committee recommended a new statement on tenure and promotion standards to the Dean who distributed it to the faculty for review prior to a faculty vote. The proposal contained a few minor changes that addressed teaching and service requirements for tenure and promotion, but what drew the most attention, especially from the junior faculty, was the revised statement on research requirements for tenure and associate professor. As expected, the proposed standards were more specific and more rigorous. Statements for the existing and the proposed standards are shown below:

Existing statement:

In the area of intellectual contributions/scholarship, the candidate must demonstrate a consistent flow of research activity, normally expected to result in an average of one publication per year in A+, A, or B level journals (or the equivalent in other intellectual contributions/scholarship activities). Equivalencies might include books, book chapters and, in exceptional circumstances, refereed conference proceedings, depending on the nature, quality, and visibility of the activities. While items representing "other intellectual contributions/scholarship activities" are acceptable as part of the candidate's portfolio, the portfolio must include at least three A+, A, or B level journal articles. In keeping with the conviction that quality of intellectual contributions and scholarship is more important than mere quantity of publication, fewer publications in top-level outlets can reduce the number of publications expected for promotion or tenure.

Proposed statement:

In the area of intellectual contributions/scholarship, promotion to associate professor and the granting of tenure require evidence of an established and continuing research program. Such evidence is normally expected to include: (1) an average of at least one article

per year during the probationary period with most of these placed in A+ and A rated journals, and (2) at least one article in an A+ journal while on the faculty of the College. However, quality is more important than quantity and multiple papers in A+ journals could compensate for a lower quantity of journal articles. Refereed conference presentations and proceedings, though encouraged, will not be considered equivalent to journal articles in meeting the requirements for tenure and promotion.

In the evaluation of faculty scholarship, a common measure was the quantity and quality of the journal articles published by the professor. While there is certainly controversy over the issue of journal quality, most schools recognize that some journals are more prestigious than others, largely because of their stature in the profession. In the College of Business at Regency State, each department had established a rating of journals in its discipline, using the shorthand symbols of A+ (recognized as the top journals in the discipline), A (prestigious journals with high national visibility), B (well-regarded journals offering national exposure), C (recognized outlets offering good exposure) to denote the level of the publication.

The upgraded requirements for tenure in the College of Business prompted considerable discussion among the faculty, especially the untenured assistant professors who could be facing higher hurdles in their efforts to earn tenure. However, the buzz among the younger faculty had now shifted to a related and potentially more critical question: How and when would the new standards be implemented? Would they be applied immediately to all tenure cases that came up in the next cycle? Or would they become effective in a year, or in two years? Or would there be a more extended phase in to give junior faculty members time to adjust to the new requirements? With the department chairs being quizzed on how the new rules would be applied, the issue became an agenda item for the meetings of the department chairs and the Dean's staff. Again, the matter was referred to the Faculty Personnel Committee for its study and recommendation.

Soon after the Committee began to tackle this assignment, it became apparent that there was a diversity of views among the members and that the road to reaching a Committee recommendation would be bumpy. At the first meeting, the division of opinion surfaced early in the session. Allen Foster, a long-term professor of finance, was outspoken in his support for implementing the policy immediately. "Look, everyone has known that the College was ratcheting up standards as a research university, as well as to be prepared for our upcoming accreditation review. This movement has been underway for years, and the faculty should accept that. It's been no secret and it takes the school in the right direction."

But Phyllis Chen, associate professor in marketing, expressed a more moderate view. “Allen, that’s a pretty tough position. Are you saying that the faculty who are now in their fifth year and come up for tenure review next fall should meet these new standards? I don’t think I can support that! You know that it takes a long time to get a paper into a top journal, going through the review and revision process.”

Bob Moody, who had been tenured and promoted to associate professor of information systems the previous year, thought the Committee should be more considerate of the younger faculty. “Why not just use the standards that were in place at the time that the faculty member was hired? So if you came in 2014, then you come up for tenure under those rules. We shouldn’t move the goal posts during the game.”

That provoked a strong reaction from Sandra Morton, professor of economics: “Bob, are you saying that we should tell new faculty members that they can be tenured if they only meet the standards at the time they’re hired? Now, where else in the world would an employer give an employee that kind of assurance – of essentially a lifetime contract? I guess that’s one reason why the outside world is so baffled by academia!”

Webb Gillman, professor of management, thought that a compromise would be the best approach. “Look, I don’t know that I can go along with either of these positions. What if we recommend that a faculty member is evaluated for tenure by the standards in place at the time of the Mid-tenure Review, which occurs in the spring of the third year? That way, no one gets surprised in their fifth year by having to meet some brand new standards, but this would allow the College to revise tenure requirements after the faculty member was hired, which seems important to me.”

Gary Donnelley, professor of accounting, had listened intently to the conversation, but seemed uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation and weighed in. “I think we need to be reasonable with the junior faculty and not up the requirements on them late in the game. I don’t think that is fair.”

At that point, Allen Foster interjected: “But Gary, fairness is not the issue here. A faculty member’s contract doesn’t promise that they will get tenure in six years. It says that to get tenure they need to meet the requirements for associate professor and the long-term needs of the school. To my knowledge, all the tenure-track assistant professors are on 2/2 loads (teaching two three-credit courses per semester) and that gives them a lot of release time for research – and that release time is a big investment by the University. The academic world is changing! I think that the Committee needs to show some leadership in trying to elevate the status of the College. Why should the Committee be a champion of low standards?”

“I think Allen is right. If we are going to get recognition from other business schools and move up in the rankings, we have to emulate the strong research schools – and that means motivating the faculty to get publications in the top journals,” Sandra Morton offered. “We need to face the facts.”

Following several more rounds of vigorous and animated discussion, Associate Dean Ron Johnson concluded by stating what seemed apparent. “Folks, I don’t think that the Committee is ready to make a decision today. Let’s take a week to think about this and come back next week and try to come up with a recommendation.” Having listened intensively for the last hour and a half and seeing signs of no convergence, Johnson thought that the Committee members needed some time to talk with their department colleagues, consider the issue carefully, and evaluate the options for this important action. Maybe in a week after some sober reflection, he thought, there will be some convergence of views and a recommendation can be moved on to the faculty. He surely hoped so!