

Failure in the Tenure Process: We Can Do Better

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I submitted my resignation in early October of my terminal year after I was denied tenure, effective December 31, 2010. I had a very good job offer from the American Political Science Association (APSA) and it was increasingly clear that I was not going to learn anything about my tenure appeal anytime soon. As it turned out, it would be the following July before I got a letter from the university president denying the appeal. The APSA was as eager for me to start as I was to move on. However, I was teaching two classes and it was the middle of the semester; I did not want to leave my students mid-term. So, I consulted before starting full time at APSA and I finished the semester.

Even after so many years, I do not quite know how to describe what it felt like to remain in my department after I was denied tenure. Perhaps it is different when the department is supportive, but that was not my experience. My department not only did not recommend tenure, the chair also wrote a scathing letter that concluded by calling my record a failure. So, to continue in that environment was...awkward. Mostly, I was ignored.

One day, I saw at the elevator one of my senior colleagues with whom I had worked closely for years. To make conversation, I mentioned not having talked to her for a while. She seemed uncomfortable and replied that she did not think she could talk to me during the tenure process, and even now she was not sure what she was permitted to say.

That brief chat was the last time I spoke to her in person, although it was not the last I heard from her. As the acting chair of the department at the time, she sent me an email mid-November, I think. It was a brief note, one or two sentences, asking me when, exactly, I would be vacating my office. They had plans for it.

I had not expected to stay until December 31—as if I would spend New Year's Eve moving out of my office—but her email made me think for a minute about whether I should mark the new year by making them wait as long as possible.

Instead, a week or so after the term ended, on a Friday night, my husband and I packed my 15-year career into so many bankers' boxes and moved them across town to my new office. We got sushi and several glasses of wine in the new neighborhood and marked the rather unceremonious end to my academic career.

Tenure is the brass ring of the academy, and careers are made or broken in the effort to achieve it in an all-or-nothing race against the clock. Yet, there are precious few authoritative sources on the rules of the race or how it is to be judged.

Universities and colleges—and some departments—have guidelines about the substantive requirements and procedural steps, but faculty manuals often seem more intent on protecting institutions from lawsuits than supporting faculty, especially those who do not fit the traditional academic mold. The APSA provides ethics guidelines (APSA Committee on Professional Ethics, Rights and Freedoms 2012); the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and others offer some best practices for tenure (American Council on Education et al. 2000); and the AAUP has a method for censuring institutional wrongdoers (AAUP 2018). However, it is unclear whether they exercise any significant influence. Scholars have studied the tenure process, providing empirical insights into decision making and suggesting solutions to challenges (Marshall and Rothgeb 2011; Matthew 2016; Rothgeb and Burger 2009), but their effect is unclear. We do not have a census of practices among political science departments or data on those who are denied tenure. Instead, the tenure process is generally conceived but highly variable and relatively opaque, and it goes under-scrutinized because those who succeed rarely question the methods and those who fail rarely talk about their experience.

To disrupt this pattern and to shed light on the dark corner of tenure denial, I have [written elsewhere](#) about my experience. Here, I focus on a few of the institutional failures apparent from my case, reflective of serious deficiencies in leadership, transparency, and accountability. These failures are not new or unique to me. For nearly 50 years, for example, this journal has published articles examining the effect of institutions on academic success in the discipline (APSA Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession 2016).

These failures are not isolated either. I present them here through the lens of my tenure process; however, from countless conversations with others, I know they are more than anecdotal. My hope is that my experience—which reflects that of so many—will provide new insight and ideas about how to address this critical yet mysterious—and frightening—path to success or failure in the academy.

INTENTIONAL HIRING

The goal of new tenure-track hires should be promotion with tenure. Departments should be committed to—and accountable for—the success of their junior faculty. Chairs, deans, and other gatekeepers should know the needs and expectations of their programs. They should be able to articulate—in writing—specific standards for tenure and provide the resources that

create the opportunity for new hires to succeed. Applicants could then make a reasonably informed decision about accepting a job, and departments would have the basis for removing pre-tenure faculty for not meeting the requirements. If tenure standards or department needs change, then the parties might renegotiate the terms of the original agreement, or changes might be applied to new hires as the program develops.

As the system currently works, junior faculty bear the burden of divining tenure requirements from overly general faculty manuals and from tightlipped senior faculty, as well as for negotiating support resources needed for success. Any failure to meet requirements is assumed to be theirs alone; indeed, the first authoritative step in the tenure review process is a review of an individual's shortcomings. The argument will always be that the individual failed on the merits,

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without reflection on whether and how the gatekeepers failed the individual. Despite processes for challenging negative assessments, the academic power structure, the opacity of the process, and the psychological and other stress on faculty make these responses—if they are made at all—largely ineffective in university appeals and in lawsuits.

In the end, junior faculty are disadvantaged by the absence of official hiring agreements, especially in a system that experiences regular leadership change and in which institutional memory often is lacking. Of course, many will argue against agreements, not least because there is little incentive for institutions to invite challenges to their decisions but also because they make flexibility and dexterity in personnel decisions more difficult. However, these concerns should not outweigh the benefits of leveling the playing field among faculty and gatekeepers.

When I was hired, everyone involved knew exactly what kind of scholar I was. Unlike many applicants for junior positions, I was an associate professor with an established publication record. I was courted by the department chair, a long-time senior member of the faculty in my subfield. He encouraged me to collaborate on projects that he said would count toward tenure, and this work was praised in pre-tenure reviews. Yet, years later, the department recommended against tenure because my research was—among other things—not rigorous enough. Indeed, the then-chair took pains in [his letter](#)² to detail the inadequacies of my work. My argument in response met deaf ears; the gatekeepers had no obligation or accountability to their previous actions and evaluations. There was no contract that anyone recognized as such and I had no meaningful recourse.

I suspect that many job candidates would accept offers knowing they would have to change the nature of their work to achieve tenure. I would not have.

CLEAR AND TRANSPARENT STANDARDS

Discussions about tenure standards can be paralyzing, and we will be hard-pressed to make meaningful progress until we come to terms with measuring tenure worthiness in an academic world that still conceives of scholarly excellence as “one-size-fits-all” despite an increasingly demographically, substantively, and methodologically diverse faculty.

However, our inability to address the substance of the standards does not obviate the need to be clear and transparent about whatever the standards are. Although some institutions have specific requirements, most identify “excellence” and “distinguished” and “high impact” as key components of

tenurable research records. Whereas gatekeepers and faculty alike may prefer the flexibility of such concepts for evaluating individual tenure cases, there is too much room for manipulation and abuse. We may believe decisions will be made in good faith and without bias, but many are not. In the worst-case scenarios, overly broad standards provide cover for institutions, and faculty are unable to present evidence that decisions are made on factors other than merit.

Additionally, such standards do not adequately inform rational decisions by faculty about their workload. It is not uncommon to be advised to talk to senior faculty, study previous tenure cases, and read between the lines of the faculty manual, but this really means that junior faculty must conjure institutional requirements. This cannot possibly be the expectation—the tenure clock is too short and the publication process too long to not have specific information about what one needs to succeed.

At my institution, the tenure standard for research was defined by the then-faculty manual as “...significant scholarly or creative accomplishments appropriate to the faculty member's discipline, show potential for becoming a scholar or artist of distinction, and have demonstrated professional recognition and growth” (quoted in [Diascro's Response to Chair's Letter](#),³ p. 12). At the extremes, this might mean something, but in the vast middle, it was open to remarkable interpretation. During our occasional department discussions about these “standards,” most faculty promoted the flexibility it allowed for hiring and promoting in different subfields. Yet, when it came to [evaluating my tenure file](#),⁴ what had previously been described as valuable contributions to the discipline was later considered subpar work that did not meet standards.

HONEST PRE-TENURE REVIEWS

Part of the obligation of hiring someone into the faculty is to provide sincere and straightforward feedback about their progress. Tenure-track faculty need and deserve honest assessments as they work toward tenure, however difficult they may be to deliver to someone who is underperforming. If department chairs and other gatekeepers are going to hold leadership positions in the university—in which they determine the fate of others—then they must be prepared to provide constructive feedback to their faculty.

Moreover, faculty should be able to rely on that feedback to make improvements; they should not have to divine the true meaning of their pre-tenure reviews. Only with adequate information can faculty make a choice about whether to leave before an unfavorable decision ultimately is made. Only with clearly and frankly written assessments can departments faithfully terminate faculty who are not fulfilling their requirements. The burden is on the institution to make this process effective and legitimate.

The process in my case worked in exactly the opposite way, particularly by the dean of the school. Whereas other

All of this is done on the assumption that it matters. However, there is reason to think that external reviews do not affect tenure decisions (Marshall and Rothgeb 2011) and, perhaps worse, that they are used to simply “justify whatever decision the department would have made on its own” (Schlozman 1998, 626). The idea that internal evaluators consider external voices as independent and meaningful sources of information about the value of the tenure candidate’s record is questionable.

I had [five external letters](#),⁷ each redacted for identifying information and included in my dossier. All were thoughtful considerations of my career. Four were very positive and one was more “cautiously optimistic.” Yet, in the chair’s and dean’s letters, all were used to justify the case against tenure, cherry-picked to support the denial narrative. The positive reviews were diminished because they were positive and (evidently) written by colleagues who knew me and my work. The only letter given any weight was the cautious one, which was viewed as negative. [According to the dean](#),⁸ “[N]egative letters are relatively rare, so any negative assessment...is a matter of serious concern.”

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gatekeepers came and went during my probationary period, the dean was the constant, and he provided regular positive feedback on my progress toward tenure. The only word of caution came in the fifth year from the associate academic dean that I publish more in peer-reviewed outlets, which I did. Yet, the dean, in a [remarkable 180-degree turn](#),⁵ not only diminished the value of these additions but also declared the whole of my research inadequate. My only recourse at that late date was to vigorously respond to the negative evaluations—an effort that went unheard.

Challenges to preferred outcomes in tenure cases are nearly impossible to make, especially when standards are so broadly defined and gatekeepers are not held accountable for the inconsistency of their interpretations and evaluations.

VALUE (OR NOT) EXTERNAL LETTERS

A nontrivial source of anxiety for tenure candidates is creating a list of possible external reviewers for their dossier. It can be a challenge for junior faculty to compile a list of senior faculty who know them and their work but with whom they have no actual professional or personal relationship; who will review their work constructively and in good faith without being overly congratulatory or disparaging; and who will be objective despite dislike of advisers, coauthors, or even the candidate. Academics are not immune to pettiness (see, e.g., [Colleague Letter of Support](#),⁶ p. 2). Then, department heads or deans add to the list and solicit reviewers. Letters are returned by whoever agrees to take valuable time and energy to write. Depending on the institution, tenure candidates know more or less about whom the reviewers are and what they write.

Perhaps this is standard treatment and interpretation of external letters in tenure cases. If so, we may want to reevaluate whether we include them at all. Beyond the impact on the tenure candidate, it seems that senior faculty asked to write tenure letters may want to know that their primary utility in the process will be to facilitate the denial of tenure. At the very least, perhaps we should not waste everyone’s precious time.

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Despite some training programs, most academics in leadership positions have little if any preparation for the serious work they do. Some are naturals: those who are recognizable by their selfless and seemingly endless commitment to supporting others by speaking and acting out against procedural and substantive injustice; using their capital to make nominations and recommendations, hires, and promotions; creating environments conducive to creativity, innovation, and advancement; and providing old-fashioned mentorship.

Then there are poor leaders, drawn from the faculty for self-serving purposes—or reluctantly by the “short straw”—to hold short- and long-term positions for which they are ill suited and ill prepared. Nevertheless, they have power to make career-altering decisions for their colleagues. As a result, we should think carefully about who is permitted to assume leadership positions and what kind of oversight is provided for their decisions. This is especially important for tenure decisions when outcomes are all or nothing. Among the many characteristics that are arguably appropriate—such as integrity, honesty, and courage—we might consider experience when choosing leaders.

When I went up for tenure, the newly appointed chair was newly tenured himself and had never served as a department head. Among the [irregularities that occurred](#)⁹ under his leadership was a [new practice](#)¹⁰ for the meeting of senior faculty that he instituted to review my case and the discussion of arguably inappropriate issues about my file at the meeting. Whether it was the lack of experience or something else that explains these procedural failures, his actions set in motion a devastating series of events from which there was no recovering.

DIGNIFIED EXIT

As I reflect on this article, I realize that there can be no dignified exit when there is so little dignity in the tenure-denial process. I want to argue that there is a way to provide denied faculty—who, after all, have been members of their departments and universities for years—some modicum of respect, space to recover, and resources to move on. However, this is not likely when failure is fully attributed to individuals, often through assaults on their record in an effort to avoid lawsuits. It is little wonder that faculty who are denied tenure are ignored and isolated. This is the ultimate institutional failure. Surely, we can do better.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

1. <http://jenniferdiascrophd.com/2016/05/04/tenure-denied-a-story-of-failure/>

2. <http://jenniferdiascrophd.com/library/tenure/department-chairs-letter/>
3. <http://jenniferdiascrophd.com/library/tenure/diascros-response-to-chairs-letter/>
4. <http://jenniferdiascrophd.com/library/tenure/diascros-response-to-chairs-letter/>
5. <http://jenniferdiascrophd.com/library/tenure/diascros-response-to-dean/>
6. <http://jenniferdiascrophd.com/library/tenure/colleague-letter-of-support/>
7. <http://jenniferdiascrophd.com/library/tenure/external-letters/>
8. <http://jenniferdiascrophd.com/library/tenure/deans-tenure-letter/>
9. <http://jenniferdiascrophd.com/library/tenure/committee-on-faculty-grievances-letter-to-president/>
10. <http://jenniferdiascrophd.com/library/tenure/colleague-letter-of-support/>

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