

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

*The task of the university is the creation of the future,
so far as rational thought, and civilized modes of appreciation,
can affect the issue.* Alfred North Whitehead

Pythian Papers on Academic Careers

Best Practices for MAKING TENURE DECISIONS: PHILOSOPHY, CRITERIA, AND EXPECTATIONS

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MAKING TENURE DECISIONS: PHILOSOPHY, CRITERIA, AND EXPECTATIONS

New faculty members, voting faculty, department heads, and members of tenure and promotion committees often struggle with tenure and reappointment decisions. The difficulty of the issue is commensurate with its importance: while tenure is one of the essential safeguards of academic freedom in American institutions, a tenured appointment also amounts to a commitment of the university's most precious resources, for a period that may span several decades. I hope to frame the issue in a way that helps pre-tenure faculty members build successful careers and that provides sound principles upon which their colleagues can evaluate their progress. The main points are as follows:

1. A decision about tenure is a decision about the future.
2. Teaching, research, and service are essential, but there are intangible factors, too.
3. Documented, discipline-specific expectations may be useful, but there are pitfalls to avoid.

None of these points is a matter of official policy or procedure, which are properly the subjects of regulations. Instead, I hope these propositions suggest compelling ways to think about tenure decisions — especially some of the difficult ones. After discussing these points, I examine their implications for new faculty members, who often wonder how to earn tenure.

The backdrop for each of these points is the traditional triad of responsibilities associated with tenure-track faculty positions: teaching, research and creative endeavors, and service. Each of these dimensions in the job description deserves an extended essay on its own, which I won't undertake here. For now it is enough to say that *all three responsibilities are essential*. Outstanding teaching does not trump weak research. World-class research does not excuse ineffective teaching. And strong performance in these two areas is no justification for a failure to contribute more broadly, to the institution or the discipline, through a judicious set of service activities.

This backdrop has important implications for tenure decisions. A public research university is a large, complicated organization. But — as most academics will attest at the time of faculty position allocations — it is always too small in many significant respects. In particular, it is too small to accommodate one-dimensional faculty members. American public research universities routinely hire faculty members who contribute to and benefit from all dimensions of the job. Indeed, our best faculty members find synergies among these activities. We owe it to our constituents to maintain this standard. It is useful to bear this principle in mind when members of the public or (what is worse) our own colleagues try to argue that a negative tenure decision based on inadequate promise in one dimension of performance implies that we don't care about the others.

A decision about tenure is a decision about the future, not about the past. The essential question to be answered is this:

Does the candidate's record reflect both the commitment and the promise to sustain a career-long record of effective teaching and advising, scholarship at the forefronts of knowledge, and effective service?

Of course, the only real information we have about a candidate is information about the past: the evidence of effective teaching and interaction with students, the record of scholarship and creative activities, the service contributions, and related data. At issue is how we use the information.

Many of us, trained as academics to pare questions down to quantifiable essentials, want to use the information algorithmically. We try to ask whether the candidate has done enough to clear some minimal hurdle. However, the hurdle is always frustratingly ill defined. I won't argue against the assertion that pre-tenure faculty members can benefit from an understanding of department, college, and university expectations. Nevertheless, in the evaluation of candidates for reappointment, tenure, and promotion, the hurdle metaphor is strikingly inept: after one clears a hurdle, one's trajectory is downward. The analogy is not lost on external critics of tenure.

Minimum performance standards frame the issue in a way that subverts academic values. At best, they invite us to justify lifetime commitments to marginal candidates. At worst, minimum standards tend to acquire a normative flavor, promoting mediocrity even in our most talented young colleagues. The hurdle-clearing metaphor distorts our thinking, misleads untenured faculty members, and misrepresents the nature of academic appointments to our constituents outside academia. It has no place in tenure decisions.

Instead, a tenure decision is a forecast. We ought to ask whether the candidate has established the momentum needed for two or three more decades' worth of strong contributions to the university's mission. It is truer to the realities of tenure — and fairer to candidates — to pose questions in the following ways:

- Does the teaching record to date indicate an ability to maintain academic rigor, to establish clear learning goals, to assess the outcomes, to engage students effectively, to develop a versatile repertoire, to contribute to curricular evolution, and to grow as a teacher?
- Do the research and creative accomplishments support the University's mission, demonstrate that the faculty member will continue to have significant influence on the field, and lend confidence that the candidate will retain the capacity to grow intellectually as the discipline evolves? The most reliable measures in this arena involve external peer review at the national or international scale.
- Do the candidate's service activities reflect a willingness to make substantive contributions to the infrastructure, governance, and advancement of the department, the discipline, or the broader community?

Teaching, research, and service are essential, but there are intangible factors, too. An academic department is an intellectual ecosystem, as is a university. Both require a diverse array of talents to thrive. To foster robust teaching, we must have faculty members with curricular vision, innovative teaching ideas, and the ability to serve as mentors to their younger colleagues. Strong research requires many different types of contributions: the creative spark needed to generate novel ideas, the talent to render these ideas compelling to one's peers, the ability to organize and lead teams of people having various disciplinary backgrounds and skills, the entrepreneurial skills needed to secure necessary resources. Effective service requires strong interpersonal skills, collegiality, and, occasionally, sheer physical stamina to get things done.

And let us not forget leadership ability. Unlike many industries, academia has an ancient tradition of getting its managers — its department heads, deans, provosts, and presidents — from the ranks of academics. This custom helps preserve institutional respect for such core values as freedom of inquiry and expression and a preference for debate and persuasion over the raw exercise of command. But it works only if academics cultivate leadership skills within their ranks. The surest way to do so is to embed some consideration of managerial acumen and leadership ability in reappointment, tenure, and promotion decisions.

These assets are not easy to fold into our decision making. The narrowest interpretations of teaching, research, and service fail to capture them. Gauging them is an inherently subjective and intangible task. They should *never* outweigh the traditional triad of responsibilities. And it is unreasonable to expect every tenure candidate to exhibit all of the characteristics just listed. In my opinion, however, it is reasonable to expect each candidate to have some of them. A university faculty is not a collection of *idiots savants*, and an academic department populated exclusively by faculty members who display no curricular vision, who engage in highly solipsistic scholarship, and who demonstrate no aptitude for leadership is dysfunctional. For this reason, it is fair to take some measured account of factors like these in making tenure decisions.

Documented, discipline-specific expectations may be useful, but there are pitfalls to avoid. It is a common article of faith that we can minimize difficult tenure decisions by establishing clear, documented criteria. Written, discipline-specific expectations can be helpful, both to candidates and to their reviewers. But there are three important caveats. First, the absence of such a document is no excuse for inadequate performance. Second, it is a mistake to think of such documents as furnishing a reliable set of sufficient conditions for tenure. Third, the emphasis must be on best practices, not minimal performance.

The first caveat is related to the proposition that a tenure decision is a decision about the future. A tenured appointment ought to reflect a rigorous judgment by peers that the faculty member will remain engaged as a self-motivated teacher and scholar for many years to come, even in a working environment as loosely supervised and *laissez-faire* in spirit as the American research university. A candidate who can rise to the expectations of tenure only with an explicit roadmap or a diligent mentor lacks the initiative and intellectual self-possession needed for a career in this setting.

The second caveat disarms a protest sometimes heard in negative tenure decisions: “I did everything I was told to do.” There are two fallacies here. The first is the belief that what a candidate is told to do constitutes a set of sufficient conditions for tenure. They are at best necessary conditions. The second is the premise that a candidate’s peers and managers have any explicit mandate to tell the candidate what to do to get tenure. To hire highly accomplished, doctorally-qualified scholars into a community that cherishes academic freedom and an extraordinary degree of intellectual independence is simply incongruous with the notion that we owe our colleagues a step-by-step recipe for a successful tenure case. It is a good idea for any document that discusses criteria for tenure to disavow this purpose.

The third caveat is that any statement of expectations should emphasize what a truly successful career ought to look like. As mentioned earlier, our academic training often tempts us to be reductionists: to establish minimum expectations and to cast them in narrow, quantitative terms. And, as argued above, minimum expectations carry debilitating risks for both the department and the candidate.

We advocate a different type of vehicle for conveying a department’s expectations. The key elements of such a document are as follows:

- It avoids any reference to minimal requirements or sufficient conditions for tenure.
- It makes clear that the candidate’s audience is much broader than the department.

- It includes reference to some of the intangible and subjective criteria that we inevitably use.
- It emphasizes the attributes of an obviously successful career, not a barely acceptable one.
- It acknowledges and strengthens the department's role in meeting the university's mission.

Appended to this memo is a skeletal format that might be appropriate for some scientific and engineering disciplines, which are closer to my personal experience than other fields. This format has no official standing; it is just a set of suggested ideas. Some may find it appealing; many others will find it disagreeable in structure or perhaps in content. I don't intend for this table to be an exclusive template for every department in every discipline. Indeed, there may be no universal agreement on the form that such a document should take, and it is reasonable to expect that any document of this type will be the subject of continual debate and refinement within the department. The format is not the point. What is important is the emphasis on energetic professional aspirations, not minimal performance. I invite every department to develop its own format and expectations.

New faculty members can take advantage of these principles. Understanding both the nature of the tenure decision and the peer-review culture in which it resides can help shape a new faculty member's strategy for the pre-tenure years. In essence the strategy is simple: to build a strong tenure case, build a strong career. But some specifics are worth mentioning.

1. **Become a versatile, engaging teacher.** As daunting as this recommendation may sound, it is within the grasp of mortals. Most people who join the professoriate do so because they love their disciplines and are committed to the academy's teaching mission. In most cases these two traits suffice. But there are traps to avoid:

- *Forgetting that your students are not all as accomplished or as enthusiastic as you are.* You've committed a lifetime to the field. Many of your students are just trying to get through the course. If you find this fact frustrating, they will notice. If you berate their level of commitment or their intellectual capacity, you will earn only their umbrage. If you approach them with enthusiasm, professionalism, and respect, you will have more fun, win a few converts, and have a significant positive impact on the lives of many others. You may even discover some diamonds in the rough.
- *Confining your repertoire.* In the short run, reluctance to expand the range of courses that you can teach is a sure way to raise warning flags among your faculty peers. In the long run, it is a recipe for mid-life ennui and early obsolescence. Professors should be the world's premier life-long learners, especially at a research university.
- *Remaining static in your approach to teaching.* A university faculty is a community of expert teachers, the best of whom are always improving their own teaching and helping nurture the teaching careers of their colleagues. In this context, complacency in one's teaching is pathologic. Join the community.

It may be difficult to become an *award-winning* teacher, but almost every one who is capable of getting hired as a faculty member can become a *good* teacher. Your job depends on it.

2. **Identify and cultivate a national or international audience for your scholarly activities.** Make a list of the people who make the important advances in your field. Aspire to play in their league. Send them copies of your work. Contribute to the same journals, publishing houses, and conferences. Where appropriate, cultivate collaborations with them. In the

meanwhile, don't place too much stock in any minimum expectations promulgated by your home department or college. Too often, departments cast their minimum expectations in terms of numbers of publications and creative works. In contrast, your most rigorous peers will be looking for real impact on the discipline — as gauged by external reviewers' letters, publication impact factors, quality of journals, and other indicators. Besides, a tenure case that just meets minimum expectations is marginal in the most literal sense of the word.

3. **If external funding is available in your field, develop and follow a plan for seeking it.**

External funding is neither necessary nor sufficient for tenure. But success at obtaining external research funding is helpful in several ways:

- It can give you some independence in supporting professional travel, funding graduate students, hosting visitors, and buying equipment and supplies.
- It helps confirm the utility of your scholarly work, both to yourself and to your faculty peers.
- In the case of highly competitive grants, it adds some cachet to your work by showing that it passes some of academia's most stringent peer reviews.
- In some fields — especially those involving large, complex laboratory or field work — external funding is critical to effective research.

4. **Find ways to connect your scholarly work with your teaching.** The most persuasive rationale for the American research university is that it promotes a cascade of discovery, from the knowledge gained at the frontiers to the expansion of the professor's intellectual range to the continual reinvigoration of the curriculum. Without this cascade, research becomes a sterile enterprise, teaching becomes drudgery, and once-promising careers stall in midlife. The discoveries that you make, whether they are new to your field or simply new to you, ought to inform your teaching.

5. **Select a meaningful array of service activities.** Be careful not to overload yourself with service commitments. But don't fall into the trap of dismissing service as a fruitless diversion. Your department's curriculum, research infrastructure, and graduate program need regular attention, as do the university's personnel decisions, planning initiatives, statewide mission, and connections with other educational institutions. In addition, most academic disciplines rely heavily on university faculty members to serve as referees, promote scholarly standards, and sustain professional societies. Pursue a circumscribed set of service contributions that matter to you.

6. **Learn how to be a leader.** People vary in their leadership aptitude. Not everyone has the inclination or patience to serve as a department head. Some forms of leadership — such as chairing a search committee for a high-level administrative post — can strain the emotional fortitude of otherwise robust personalities. But like every profession ours needs people who have organizational acumen, empathic persuasive skills, and pragmatic vision. Whether or not you

aspire to any formal leadership position, you'll be better able to shape your own working environment and career trajectory if you cultivate these attributes.

7. **Maintain a love of your discipline.** We all learned two things in graduate school: we can never know everything in our fields, and our fields are continually changing. An academic discipline is easily deep enough to engage an energetic scholar for a lifetime, and most disciplines have fascinating links to other fields that open new doors for inquiry and discovery. Your colleagues and students — the people who have the most influential voices in decisions about tenure and promotion — know instinctively whether or not you're engaged, and this knowledge is perhaps the most critical factor in their recommendations.

Tenure decisions are never easy. They are inherently subjective, and for this reason it is perhaps impossible to eliminate all sources of anxiety. But a steadfast emphasis on solid career aspirations and the future of the institution can help. Tenure decisions weigh less heavily — both on the candidate and on the psyches of the candidate's peers — when the discussion centers on *how* we can keep a faculty member rather than *whether* we should.

Stages and Hallmarks of a Successful Faculty Career: A Possible Template

Career Stage	Characteristic Teaching Accomplishments	Characteristic Research Accomplishments	Characteristic Service Accomplishments
Assistant professor, year 1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classroom competence at several levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 or 2 refereed papers related to PhD or postdoctoral work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Optional committee work.
Assistant professor, years 2-4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classroom competence at all levels. Development of original course material and special topics courses. Participation in MS and PhD committees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refereed publications extending beyond PhD or postdoctoral work. Submission of external grant proposals. Development of new, productive collaborations. Supervision of graduate students. Contributions to national or international conferences. Clear capacity to publish refereed work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective participation in department-level committees. Refereeing for journals.
Assistant professor approaching tenure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reliable teaching at all levels. Solid repertoire (7-8 courses) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of national or international recognition. Participation in successful competitive grant proposals. Supervision of graduate students to completion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some service outside the department (statewide articulation, high-school visits, professional societies). Chairing less work-intensive departmental committees.
Associate professor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation in curriculum development. Contributions to E-CTL or other significant conversations about teaching. Steadily increasing repertoire. Coordination with curricula in client departments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing range of original results. Supervision of PhD students. Undertaking longer-range projects (monographs, new research areas). Invited colloquia at other universities. Regular participation in national or international conferences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation in college- or university-level committees. Chairing work-intensive committees (e.g. graduate committee). Regular refereeing for journals, NSF, etc.
Associate professor approaching promotion to professor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentoring younger faculty. Following of upper-division and graduate students. Genuine breadth of repertoire (12-15 courses). Sure-handedness and versatility: professional, reliable job in any course. Innovative approaches (distance learning, collaborative teaching, non-lecture formats.) College- or university-wide recognition. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifiable body of recognized research contributions, with clear momentum to continue. Completion of longer-range projects. Invitations to special sessions, plenary talks, national panels. Successful MS and PhD graduates. Record of success as PI on grants. Expanding range of collaborators. International audience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chairing college- or university-level committees. Involvement in editorial boards. Organizing workshops or conferences. Leadership in hiring, cross-college initiatives, professional societies.