

The TPR Process: Fight Together or Hang Separately

One of the mixed blessings associated with gaining academic tenure is the obligation/privilege/responsibility of serving on a tenure, promotion, and retention committee. As a "newbie" to the other side of the TPR process, I've been concerned and troubled about some things. I suspect I may not be alone. Some of my concerns are professional; some are personal.

First, what are the qualifications for TPR, who determines them, and who decides when they have been met? The University of North Carolina Board of Governors established basic TPR guidelines for our state universities. Those guidelines have been incorporated into The Faculty Handbook, which says that TPR criteria are to be developed by academic departments and incorporated into a departmental TPR document. If I understand the process, the departmental TPR document is then approved by the department's college and the university. Once approved, that departmental TPR document governs TPR decisions for departmental faculty. Right? Yeah, right!

It makes sense for departments to establish the criteria. Faculty sharing disciplines are grouped into departments. Those departments also allocate resources, determine teaching loads, perform Annual Faculty Evaluations, provide peer evaluations, and do outcomes assessments that impact on both learning and teaching. It is also the departments that provide reduced teaching loads and otherwise make provisions for research time. While the stated policy calls for the departmental TPR document to be the basis for TPR decisions, many of us have long suspected that actual decisions derive from other criteria. We have seen positive departmental TPR committee recommendations rejected higher up the food chain, despite the fact that our disciplinary peers are to be found at the departmental level. We have even seen positive recommendations by BOTH DEPARTMENTAL AND COLLEGE TPR committees rejected at the university level.

One wonders by what criteria a university-wide committee or administrator can more accurately evaluate a faculty member than departmental peers or college colleagues? Are they reading the same TPR document? Is there a secret, mystical, university TPR document that takes precedence over departmental documents? Are university-level rejections of positive recommendations from departments and colleges honest, if somewhat arrogant, attempts to evaluate faculty in accordance with written criteria relevant to individual disciplines? If so, what leads a faculty member serving on a university committee to think he or she is capable of

rendering a better evaluation of a colleague from another discipline than that colleague's disciplinary peers? Doesn't make much sense, does it?

Maybe it does. What if university-level TPR committees or administrators seek to "blackball" or punish, rather than genuinely evaluate on the basis of established departmental criteria? What if their function is to screen out "undesirables" or settle scores? Doesn't that make more sense? Or, what if the agenda is to save money by not promoting if possible. Think about it. The departmental committee says that, based on our departmental criteria, we recommend TPR. So do the department head, the college committee, and the college dean. No, says the university committee or administrator. All of you are mistaken.

Faculty decisions are supposed to be based on disciplinary-specific criteria drawn up by academic departments and published in departmental TPR documents, not on arbitrary standards, hunches, or feelings. Should those of us who serve on departmental and college TPR committees and struggle with the evaluations of our colleagues meekly submit to the rejection of our recommendations? Why have such committees if a university committee or administrator is going to make the decision anyway? Why did departments prepare TPR documents if they will not be used? Why doesn't the university simply issue a single, one-size-fits-all document that guarantees a faculty of "Stepford" Professors who don regalia and dutifully do as directed? Why the charade?

To fool us and those we recruit, of course. Much better to champion a sham system, pick us off one-by-one, and send chilling messages about expectations to those who follow us. I even heard one administrator tell an untenured faculty member in my department (which weights teaching as 60% of the total TPR criteria) that the faculty member would never get tenure unless the faculty member devoted less time to teaching and working with students and more time to preparing articles for tree-killing journals with minuscule audiences. I'll give odds the current TPR system at WCU is not what the Board of Governors intended in their TPR guidelines. I doubt it's what legislators or taxpayers want. I know it's not what students want. Anyone want the bet?

This year, how many faculty members, myself included, had their TPR applications rejected at the upper level, despite favorable recommendations from departments and colleges? How widespread is the problem? Who knows? Officials wrap themselves in a cloak of confidentiality they say is needed for personnel actions. They count on individual faculty members being too embarrassed at being rejected or too fearful of future decisions to make a public fuss about the system.

Let's put an end to that secrecy and shine some light on the process. I'll start with a personal "outing." This year, according to the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, my application for promotion from assistant professor to associate professor was rejected by a UNANIMOUS NEGATIVE vote of the university TPR committee, despite a UNANIMOUS POSITIVE vote by my departmental committee, a positive recommendation by my department head, an 11-1 POSITIVE vote by the Arts and Sciences TPR committee, and a positive recommendation by the Acting Dean. The promotion's no big deal, and the pay differential's meager. However, the slap in the face, rather than the expected pat on the back, stings.

Now that I serve on my department's TPR committee, I'm deeply troubled by inevitable conflicts that lie ahead. Sooner or later, the recommendation of my committee about one of my departmental colleagues will be rejected. What will I do then? I hope I will find the courage to protest that rejection as publicly as possible and to demand a public accounting by whoever has rejected our recommendations. I hope I will champion our departmental criteria and our assessment of peers within our discipline. Surely, I will challenge any administrator presumptuous enough to overturn the collective wisdom of the faculty.

I challenge you to join me in coming out and making your treatment public. Yes, I'll probably fight, even if alone, but fighting together would be so much more effective. If you are concerned about this issue, let me know. I will compile a list of names and start an email discussion list that might lead to Faculty Senate consideration or some other appropriate action. Let's bring everything out in the open and subject it to scrutiny. Let's stop submitting meekly to unfair treatment. We owe it to ourselves, as well as to those who follow us.

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