

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "The TPR Process: Fight Together or Hang Separately," by John Moore, 4/1/99

As the country preacher said, "Let the church say amen!" This, of course, assumes that there are believers among the congregation. The congregation to which Professor Moore is speaking is not religious, but its members follow a calling, a mission, a purpose, a dream--with devotion, dedication and an almost mythical faith that what they are doing is important and honorable, worthy. They are teachers. Ahhh, teachers. So talented, so committed, so... gullible. And foremost among that number at WCU is... me. Like John Moore, I believed that systems were in place and working. I believed that TPR committees were serious business. I believed that WCU was a living, feeling entity. I believed that a unanimous decision made by a diverse group of teachers would be accepted as such. Regrettably, over the past few years, I have come to the sad realization that I was mistaken. There really are folks who will tell you that the pungent mist falling on your face on a cloudless day is rain. But, even now, after witnessing a series of actions and decisions worthy of a dastardly scalawag straight out of Dickens, I still believe that Western has a conscience--and it is us.

Alfred Wiggins, Associate Professor, Communication and Theatre Arts

I appreciate John's courage to speak out and his clarity on many of the issues facing TPR reform on this campus. I have heard about numerous cases over the past seven years of problems with TPR in all the colleges. These problems have continued to exist under three Chancellors, three Vice Chancellors, and changes in Deans. Unfortunately, changes in administration have not resulted in any changes in the internal problems facing faculty. It is time for something to finally change or we will lose the good people who are coming to WCU. Without maintaining a quality faculty we cannot have the quality University that we speak about in the public arena. Thank you, John, for initiating the dialogue on TPR and to Henry Mainwaring for raising the salary issues in an earlier issue of the Forum.

It is important to note, however, that the TPR problems do not just occur at the university level committee, but also exist with departments and colleges ignoring TPR documents and abusing power. The gross lack of clarity in many TPR departmental documents is an important contributing factor to this problem. Furthermore, the lack of accountability for the committees and their corresponding chairs--the Department Heads, Deans, and the Vice Chancellor--also contribute to this problem. There is, however, one solution to this problem that faculty can initiate quickly within their departments--they can revise their TPR documents.

A couple of years ago our department developed a detailed, transparent TPR document with the intention of removing any question as to what is required for TPR. This document was approved by the administration. The document's clarity allows for faculty to plan and it removes much of the potential for capriciousness from the committees and their chairs. It also provides some evidence for accountability (whether in the grievance process or in the courts) for the administrators responsible for this process. Our departmental TPR document specifically defines what is required to achieve excellent performance in teaching, research, and service. It literally has lists from which we can check boxes to determine our qualification for TPR. Given our annual approval system for TPR documents, our document can change over time. Therefore there is no need to be concerned about inflexibility. Too much flexibility is one of the problems with the TPR system. Although creating clear documents will not solve all the problems we currently face with our TPR system, it is something faculty, both tenured and untenured, can do to remove some of the absurdity that currently exists. Furthermore, the clarity will strengthen a faculty member's case in a grievance process or court case.

Susan Kask, Economics, Finance, and International Business

Responses to "TPR," by John Moore, 4/1/99, continued

I appreciate John's speaking out on what seems to be a flaw in our tenure, promotion, and reappointment process. The overturning at the university level of departmental and college TPR votes should be a very rare occurrence. And even when done with the clear purpose of redressing earlier errors in the process, such a reversal demands clear and open explanation--if the purpose is to improve faculty performance rather than to permit behind-the-scenes manipulation.

If indeed, as Dr. Moore's letter implies, no clear communication was sent to the department and college committees to explain where and why their recommendations went astray, such action should be seen as a contravention of Western Carolina University's faculty governance system. If a majority recommendation of my department's TPR committee--arrived at through careful and lengthy effort and considered judgment on our part--were treated so cavalierly, I would be incensed.

What say the rest of you? Is there, in fact, a legitimate explanation somewhere in all of this? If not, the situation smells, and we should exert whatever efforts we can through the Faculty Senate to see that this sort of action does not recur. Not to do so would suggest things about our university which would make any serious educator despair.

R. Steve Eberly, English

John Moore pointed out one of many problems which are very common here at WCU. These injustices are nothing new to those of us who have been around for a while. Sometimes injustices occur at the university level and sometimes they occur at other levels. It all boils down to administrators not doing their jobs. Administrators should be fighting for fair treatment of their faculty instead of turning a blind eye to the situation whenever it would require the guts to say "This is wrong and I am going to fix it."

Name withheld because I have been punished too many times for "speaking out of turn."

It seems to me from an unsystematic sample of cases over the last thirty years that the University TPR Committee has always been inclined to turn down candidates, especially for promotion, who came to them with good credentials and strong support from their departments and schools/colleges. They rarely reverse negative decisions by these bodies. I haven't served on the University TPR Committee so I don't know what criteria they apply and "personnel matters" cloaks their criteria and policies in mystery, but the committee always seems to see its mission as limiting the numbers in the hallowed ranks, rejecting candidates for any reason or none.

In the current administrative atmosphere of cheese-paring economies in staffing, it is no wonder that the TPR Committee is pursuing this mission with zeal. It is consistent with the Administration's unwillingness to support popular and successful but pitifully-understaffed newer programs or to replace retiring faculty with critical specialties in long-established successful programs. It's a kinder and gentler but no less wrong-headed version of a policy begun by the English Department in the '70's, initiated by firing three of its tenure-track professors. The reasoning then was that part-time and term appointees with no benefits were cheaper per class hour and per FTE and that the then-current tenure-hostile cheese-paring administration would approve.

The current situation looks like another case of a faculty body pandering to an administrative priority that solves a current problem but which saps the morale of the faculty, undermining its quality in the long run. The solution cannot be limited to the TPR Committee; the Administration needs to renew its commitment to a quality faculty in a number of tangible ways.

Allen Moore, Biology

Responses to "TPR," by John Moore, 4/1/99, continued

Kudos to John Moore for going public with yet another instance that illustrates the decades of abuse involving WCU's reward system. Given that the data John presents are accurate, how can such a disparity between department / college votes and the University TPR Committee be explained if, as required, TPR committees at all levels are evaluating against the same criteria? Such discrepancies create and reinforce the common perception that WCU's reward system is more of a political system than it is a merit system. Colleagues suggest to me that the University TPR Committee is a rogue committee, out of control, that it does not base its decisions on official criteria. What to do?

During the next academic year the faculty will begin rewriting faculty governance documents. The following are suggestions on how to start changing the TPR process. First, abolish the University TPR Committee. Given that departments and colleges do not always make fair and just decisions either, perhaps this is not the wisest move. Second, put boundaries on what the University TPR Committee can do. For example, the Committee cannot overturn recommendations from colleges unless there is clear evidence of egregious violation of procedure, violation of legitimate TPR criteria, or uneven application of the criteria. University TPR is to be viewed primarily as a review committee, not a recommendation making committee. Third, educate faculty that different departments have a legitimate right, under our governance documents, to have different criteria and that university level personnel decisions must be made around departmental criteria, not personal preferences. Fourth, hold department heads and deans accountable for the quality of departmental TPR criteria and of the personnel decision making process. Fifth, provide faculty candidates with more information, both positive and negative, earlier in the process, so surprises do not occur.

The above does not, of course, resolve John's frustration, the violation of fairness, or the emotional stress. Having been there and done that, and realizing that there is no resolution because the system on paper is not the system in action, the only resolution is to prevent future occurrences by changing the process and then insuring that the new process is applied even handedly. Wishful thinking?

Bill Kane, Management

John Moore has raised important questions about the procedures for tenure and promotion that are at the heart of the academic community and self-governance. I applied for both tenure and promotion and was initially approved for tenure but not for promotion. I was dismayed and frankly terribly discouraged to the point of questioning whether to continue my career at Western. Like Moore, I had received unanimous support for promotion from the department TPR committee, an 11-1 positive support from the school TPR committee, and positive support from both my department chair and the dean, only to be rejected initially at the University level. I requested and received an administrative review and was allowed to make a presentation to the committee in person. They reversed their decision, and I have been recommended for promotion.

What concerns me is the role of the University committee and the Vice Chancellor in evaluating candidates. The committee and the Vice Chancellor treated me graciously and professionally. I was convinced that they were serious about their commitment to the institution and the quality of its faculty. But I should never have had to go before that committee to explain the value and the quality of research involved in preparing a scholarly edition of a novel, or to explain how such publications are reviewed by peers, or to justify the value of preparing published manuals for computer users if one teaches technical writing. I say that because none of these are issues in the departmental TPR document by which I was supposed to be evaluated. To quote Moore, one wonders by what criteria a university-wide committee or administrator can more accurately evaluate a faculty member than departmental peers or college colleagues?

I believe it is time that we examined the issue of tenure and promotion in the Faculty Senate. Nothing is more central to self-governance. We must develop clear, written criteria within our departments and evaluate our peers by those criteria and no other. As it stands now, we are divided against one another, and rumors and personalities play too great a role. I believe the University level

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TPR function should be to review procedures, making sure that the department and the college committees properly apply the written criteria. The University committee and the Vice Chancellor's office are too far removed from the discipline to make fair and informed evaluations about quality, even with the best of intentions.

The senate needs to determine whether our role as faculty on these committees has authority or is merely advisory. Finally, I believe we need to create an honest mentoring system and get our story straight. I heard over and over, "teaching is important, but really the only thing the university level looks at is your publications." Tenure and promotion is our business because these are our peers, and we are affecting their lives and our futures together.

Newt Smith, English

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Response to the Responses:

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Hi, my name is Gary Pool. I am one of the notorious "gang of 11" otherwise known as the University Tenure and Promotion Committee for 1999. Our other descriptions gleaned from the recently published reviews of our work are: "top of the food chain," "arrogant," "blackballers" (J. Moore); "abusers of power" (Kask); "dastardly scalawag" (Wiggins); "flawed," "cavalier" (Eberly); "cheese-parers," "panderers" (A. Moore); and "political," "violators of fairness" (Kane). Whereas there were a plethora of anti-TPR responses and a paucity of pro-TPR please allow me to attempt to balance the ledger. First, forget the administration, keep this a faculty to faculty issue, it is too easy to divert attention away from faculty responsibilities by invoking the administration. Second, any observations that I offer are generalities on due process and are absolutely unrelated to the specifics of any particular TPR committee deliberations that I have participated in over the past 29 years.

I have served on many TPR committees at all levels covering generations of different faculty and different philosophies. I have generally found these committees to be serious, fair, professional and committed to decisions that are in the best interest of Western Carolina University's future and students. I have heard allegations of selective blackballing before. Sure it has happened; where is it more likely to happen? Maybe closer to home in the department or college. At the University level? How arrogant of someone to think that they are so important, so much the focus of attention, that eleven faculty from diverse disciplines and philosophies from the far corners of this university (most do not know each other before) could or would single out and conspire to blackball an individual who most committee members don't know! Get real!

If there have been conspiracies I believe they more likely have been faculty conspiring to be lenient, the good-old-boys or everybody-gets-a-blue ribbon syndromes, at department and college levels. Overturning prior decisions by other committees is rare, but I have seen it happen as often to prior negative votes as to positive votes. Departmental TPR documents are full of subjective criteria and thus are open to interpretation and application based on the judgements of fair minded committee members. I was intrigued by previous responders' variety of suggestions for improving the process. The suggestions all seemed to advocate more objective TPR documents with less dependence on faculty judgement. To best accomplish their goals seems to require that each department develop a TPR op-scan checklist. The candidate would mark the appropriate boxes with a number 2 lead pencil and submit the completed checklist by e-mail to the VAX to be op-scanned. The computer would score it, type and mail the letter of congratulations and we academicians would not have to serve on those committees. Talk about generating "Stepford Professors". . . .

By the way, according to one department's TPR criteria this response would allow me to check one box under Professional Development.

SIGNED ANONYMOUS!