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Our TPR System--Comments Toward a Meaningful Dialogue

John Moore's piece on tenure provides an excellent catalyst for a discussion that we, as a university community, need to engage. I believe, however, that focusing on the "arbitrary standards, hunches, or feelings" (that may in fact be too pervasive in tenure decisions) will accomplish little but to exacerbate existing tensions and negative perceptions. A suggested focus to help steer the discussion in meaningful and constructive directions is to ask:

To what extent does the current tenure system add to or detract from our purpose and mission, and in what ways should the tenure system be improved to help us better serve our students (and other constituents)?

Is the term tenure "system" designed to encompass all processes and procedures before, during, and after tenure--much more than just the process of tenure review and actual tenure decisions?

Perhaps the fundamental root cause of distress, and the underlying limitations of the tenure system, is the incongruence between the levels involved in the tenure process. As John stated, tenure guidelines are set at the departmental level. While this may be appropriate to an extent, tenure itself is really granted at the university level. The courts have interpreted tenure as, in essence, a "property interest" in the university that cannot be taken away without due process. Thus, tenure grants a professor university level rights and protections, though tenure decisions are supposed to be based on departmentally set criteria. Such "differences" in levels of review, decision, rights, and protections predispose the process to gamesmanship and politics, leading to highly dysfunctional conflicts that become personal.

It would be hard to refute the underlying premise of tenure--protection of academic freedom. We should all be free to express our ideas, beliefs, knowledge, and opinions without fear of retribution. Unfortunately, it appears that over time the tenure process and system has degenerated into an entitlement program that, in part, reduces overall accountability for action and results.

Since my arrival at WCU four years ago, I have been both amazed and disheartened by two very common behaviors surrounding the tenure system. First, I have repeatedly heard comments like "you shouldn't do that because you are not tenured." While most of these comments appear to originate from sincere concern for my well being (and I do appreciate the concern), the

underlying message was baffling. In discussing this issue with others, particularly other non-tenured faculty, the conclusion to be drawn is "until you get tenure, stick your head in a hole, do your research (and lots of it), and be careful in voicing your opinions." Such behaviors lead to stagnation, isolation, and insulation--invariably leading to the second baffling behavior.

This second behavior, which I have witnessed enough to believe that perhaps tenure should be eliminated altogether, is the almost total withdraw and detachment that some faculty demonstrate after being tenured. Unfortunately, such behavior is understandable given the messages sent prior to being tenured. When achieving tenure is viewed as a political battle to be "won," the natural result of such victory is the adoption of feelings of entitlement--"I've been through the wringer and have earned the right to pursue other interests." Such behaviors, and the accompanying cynicism, hinder the educational process and the overall effectiveness of our university. They also serve to undermine the merits of the tenure system.

So, what are the answers? I do not pretend to have any grand solutions (though I do have some ideas). I do, however, have a few suggestions for questions that may guide our discussion in meaningful and constructive directions:

1. Why are tenure discussions "private." Do we not teach our students that they should be able to offer constructive criticisms to others and be able to accept such criticisms themselves? It's too bad we can't look each other in the eye and communicate our frustrations with each other. To me, it's kind of like posting grades and skipping town to avoid students. Such behaviors are both hypocritical and anti-learning. If someone does not deserve tenure, shouldn't we be willing to tell him / her face to face instead of passing blame onto a "committee" or "the administration"?
2. How can we overcome the inherent biases involved in having your closest colleagues vote on your tenure and then having others who are only marginally (if at all) familiar with your work and/or contributions make the "final" decisions? Our close colleagues, given their proximity, are often least willing to pose the challenges and provide the criticism necessary for improvement and good decision making. Conversely, those who have limited knowledge of an individual cannot take into consideration the little "extras" that, while hard to put on paper, make candidates for tenure and promotion extremely valuable colleagues.
3. What, clearly, are the criteria on which tenure should be granted / denied, and how should they be assessed? Relying on departmental criteria creates a system whereby some are held to very strict standards while others are held to very lenient standards, all in pursuit of the same reward. Such a system is inherently unfair and prone to conflict, politics, and gamesmanship. We should not just accept "UNC system bylaws" as justification for departmentally based criteria. Doing so only creates more tension as we try to pass off the limitations of the tenure system on others.
4. What can we do to help reduce or eliminate the pervasive cynicism and negativity surrounding the tenure system? Such cynicism and negativity get passed on to our

students and ultimately undermine the quality of everything we do as an institution of "higher" learning.

As most who know me would attest, I am never shy to voice my opinions and concerns and would welcome the opportunity to engage in broader, face-to-face discussions of these issues. I have talked to many people with many different lengths of service at WCU. It seems that, for the most part, the University-level tenure system is more likely to tenure those who may not be deserving than to not tenure those who are. However, I do recognize that we have much room for improvement, and am willing to put effort into making these improvements.

If these discussions degenerate into gripe sessions, name calling, or blaming games--or start down the road of creating unenforceable, watered down policy--I will politely dismiss myself from the discussions. That energy will be much better spent towards the development of our students.

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