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# TENURE

Minerva's your choice, and for the first time in several years the pressure seems lifted. Your Ph.D. is in hand, you have found a promising position, and the future looks bright. Thus over the summer you pack up and prepare to move near the university's majestic hilltop campus. Once there, you eagerly become oriented to the academic scene, meeting your departmental colleagues (including two new assistant professors appointed along with you), and putting the finishing touches on syllabi for your upcoming courses.

When the semester starts, however, and you zestfully begin classes, something is happening to which you may be oblivious. No one will mention it, but if you listen carefully, you'll hear a faint sound: the ticking of the tenure clock.

Why be concerned? After all, your tenure decision is years down the road. But don't be fooled. In academia, the six-year probationary period passes with stunning rapidity.

Your first hurdle is the early review (at Minerva, after three years) undertaken by the department to decide whether to renew your contract. That judgment, like the tenure decision, depends on your performance in the three traditional categories of professorial responsibility: your teaching as judged by student and (I hope) peer evaluations; your service, notably your participation in departmental and faculty-wide committees; and your research, based primarily

on publications. We'll explore each of these areas and their relative importance in later chapters. Here I'll simply say that unless you are a major disappointment, you should be granted additional years, but you will also receive written evaluations from both the chair and the dean. These assessments need to be taken seriously, especially if they contain negative comments.

If you are reappointed but eventually denied tenure, the school is supposed to have documents that form a "paper trail," evidence making clear that your weaknesses were indicated to you early enough for you to improve. Without that record, the school could be vulnerable to a lawsuit if it turned you down for tenure after having given you entirely positive evaluations. Thus the warnings you receive now could provide the basis for eventual rejection.

How should you respond if you receive an evaluation that points to supposed deficiencies? If the criticisms are based on misreading your record, you should provide evidence demonstrating that a mistake has been made and insist that the error be corrected. In response, the chair or dean is required either to alter the assessment or try to justify it.

Suppose, however, you realize that the criticisms are well founded. Then you have to take steps to rectify the problem. Without such corrective action, the chances of your receiving tenure are seriously in doubt.

After several more years that pass sooner than you would have supposed, the time comes for the crucial decision: will you be awarded permanent membership on the faculty or, with a year's notice, be told to depart?

To help prepare for this moment, let's review the workings of the tenure system, which with slight variations is in effect at virtually every American college and university.

When the sixth year of your service arrives, you will prepare a file containing a list of all your academic activities, copies of publications, and any other materials you think relevant. The department will add evaluations of your teaching as well as assessments of your research, the latter likely to include some requested by the depart-

ment from faculty members at other institutions. You'll probably be invited to suggest scholars to serve in this advisory capacity, and if you've been active in networking, you'll be able to offer the names of appropriate professors sympathetic to your work.

In due course the tenured members of your department will gather in private session to discuss your case then vote on whether to support your tenure. No one misses that meeting.

The reason that tenured members alone vote is to avoid conflict of interest. Were the untenured members to cast a ballot, they would be voting on someone who might eventually vote on them. Under such circumstances, two professors could exchange support for mutual advantage, or self-interest might lead one to try to eliminate the other. To minimize such possibilities, untenured members neither attend the meeting nor vote, although for the record they may submit written evaluations of the candidate.

The next step is for the department to send its recommendation to the dean, who forwards it to a college-wide faculty committee responsible for reviewing all personnel matters. Based on the judgments of both the department and that committee, the dean makes a recommendation to the provost, who after considering all the relevant evidence makes a final recommendation for the president's approval and subsequent action by the board of trustees. While in theory the president could differ with the provost or the board with the president, such occurrences are rare. The provost's recommendation is almost always decisive.

These procedures are the formal ones, but some practical considerations also hold sway. If the department's recommendation is negative, your situation is dire. Only if the dean or other faculty members believe that the department has displayed raw partisanship or prejudice will they dissent from its assessment that you are not qualified to receive tenure. After all, if your departmental colleagues are unimpressed with your professional record, why should those who are not experts in the field disagree with the judgment?

Even if the department's recommendation is positive, however, the outcome is still uncertain. Others may suspect that the depart-

ment is protecting one of its own, overvaluing accomplishments and downplaying weaknesses. Why might the members of a department act in such a way? Remember, you have been their colleague for years: working together, socializing, perhaps playing sports, or even going on vacations. In short, they may have become your friends, and their affection for you could have influenced their decision. Even if they recognize that your credentials are at best marginal, they may not want to be deprived of your company, and, even more important, not wish to subject you to the distress of losing your job, having to move, and undergoing a trying search for another position you may never find, thus leaving you no choice but to exit academic life altogether. (On the optimistic side, note that having been turned down for tenure by one school is not usually held against you by faculty members elsewhere, who understand the vagaries of the system.)

Under these circumstances, one can sympathize with a department's granting the benefit of the doubt to a favored member. Such an action, however, could have long-term, harmful consequences, affecting future colleagues and students even for decades. As philosopher and educator Sidney Hook observed: "most . . . tenured faculty who have lapsed into apparent professional incompetence . . . were marginal cases when their original tenure status was being considered, and reasons other than their proficiency as scholars and teachers were given disproportionate weight."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, why should a college award tenure to a present member of the faculty, if more capable persons stand ready to serve?

Thus, for the good of the institution, policies need to be in place to protect the school against a department's lowering standards. For that reason, the system requires your tenure to be approved not only by your own department but also by both the dean and provost after input from selected members of other departments.

To avoid the campus upset that so often accompanies a disputed tenure case, deans dislike reversing a department's recommendations and much prefer that the department itself makes the tough

1 Sidney Hook, *Education and the Taming of Power* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1973), 213.

calls. Departments that shirk that duty soon lose the dean's confidence and find themselves at the back of the line when new resources are distributed. Thus the pressure on the department not to engage in favoritism is considerable.

Now that we have completed our overview of the tenure process, a few lessons should be clear. First, the good will of your departmental colleagues is essential. However affable they may be, you and they both know that your future at the institution depends on their support. If you act so as to antagonize tenured members or give them reason to doubt your value to the department, you're in trouble.

Thus don't join one faction against another. You might make friends, but you'll almost certainly make enemies, and at tenure time even one enemy is too many. Granted, the vote in favor of your permanent appointment need not be unanimous, but one tenured member who is unhappy with you may persuade others to drop you and bring in a fresh face.

Don't gossip. Within the confines of an academic department, even supposed secrets are soon revealed to all. Thus what you say and to whom you say it is apt to become public knowledge.

Don't brag. Arrogance does not win friends. No matter how considerable your accomplishments, don't boast about how much more you have achieved than the other members of the department, especially those who earned tenure long ago. The bottom line is that they have tenure, and you don't. If you're viewed as overbearing, you probably never will have it.

But what happens when the department faces an important issue, and a conflict divides the members? I am not suggesting that during discussions you remain silent. You should express your views, lest others consider you uninformed or unconcerned. But be circumspect. Don't engage in personal attacks, don't fight unnecessary battles, and don't aggressively lead a campaign for an idea that is possibly anathema to several tenured members. Always remember who's arrayed against you. In short, have the courage to take a stand but don't be foolhardy and defend your position at all costs. If you do, you'll probably end up displaying your boldness at a different institution.

As one of my colleagues was told by his chair, “You are perceived as an obstacle.” Perhaps needless to say, his career in that department did not end happily.

Finally, let’s remind ourselves why tenure is so important. While students may not know which professors hold it, faculty members never forget. After all, to have tenure is to possess the ultimate job security. Under its protection, the pressure truly is lifted, and when you stroll the campus, you do so armed with a cloak of invincibility.

When thinking about the centrality of tenure to faculty life, I always return to an image related by the philosopher Andrew Oldenquist. He recalled that at his university an art professor had placed in his studio window a small blue neon sign he had made that flashed “tenure.” Oldenquist speculated, “Perhaps it counted as conceptual art; perhaps it won him tenure. I never knew.”<sup>2</sup> Regardless, the sign serves as a striking reminder of a most distinctive feature of academic life, and the one professors especially treasure.

2 Andrew Oldenquist, “Tenure: Academe’s Peculiar Institution,” in *Responsibility and the University: Studies in Academic Ethics*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 56.