

Riding on the Tenure Track

What makes or breaks a college teacher's career?

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HE DRONES. HE MOANS. HE PONTIFICATES pointlessly for hours, a cloud of chalk dust settling like dandruff on the shoulders of his tweed jacket. The Bad Professor is the bane of all students, and thanks to the tenure process, he may remain at your alma mater long after you've graduated. Worse yet, the teacher who has his students stand atop their desks yelling "carpe diem" may be asked to seize the pink slip.

In the world of academic Darwinism, where research grants fund programs and summon heady prestige, institutions seem to be falling into a pattern of granting tenure to professors whose bodies are in the classroom but whose hearts and minds aren't.

Although the tenure process varies at every university, most schools follow traditional guidelines. After five or six years, the tenure candidate goes through a series of evaluations — by the department, a schoolwide committee, a dean or provost, the president and finally trustees. Many schools require the nod from 60 percent of the department and universal approval at all other levels.

When evaluating teachers, most colleges and universities balance the teacher's performance in the classroom with the quality and quantity of research projects and service to the community. Once tenure is granted, a university must demonstrate "adequate cause" — a tedious and difficult case to prove — to dismiss a professor.

The tenure bubble

Achieving tenure is the pinnacle of many teachers' careers. It often comes with a substantial pay raise, a lighter class load and job security. More important, advocates say, is that tenure allows for greater academic freedom — a key element to higher education. Tenured professors, without the looming threat of termination, have the freedom to try out new ideas and opinions otherwise thought of as "risky."

"I wouldn't have a job if I weren't tenured," says Richard Berthold, an associate professor of history at the U. of New Mexico. Berthold is a self-professed wise-ass with a big mouth. "I'm off-the-wall radical on the First Amendment and freedom of speech. I say things in class that would get me fired without tenure."

Tenure secures academic freedom and freedom of speech at the PC university of the '90s, Berthold says.

But others argue that the current tenure system preserves "deadwood" — outdated professors who continue to teach long after their teaching methods and classroom manner have expired.

Bye bye security?

At Florida Gulf Coast U., a new university in the state system, administrators will have the option of offering multi-year contracts as an alternative to tenured positions. The contracts, renewable after two or three years, do not threaten the liberties that tenured faculty believe they have, says Steve Belcher, director of human resources at the university.

"The faculty are protected in the sense that if they feel their academic freedom or freedom of speech has been violated, [they can address the issue in court]," Belcher says.

Still, other schools are considering post-tenure evaluations to review faculty performance. Post-tenure reviews are already in effect at the U. of Colorado, U. of Hawaii and U. of Wisconsin.

Advocates say the evaluations will allow universities to pinpoint deadwood and to encourage good

faculty members. Others say the reviews are unnecessary and threaten to undermine the tenure process.

Making the grade

How hard is it to obtain the stamp of approval? It all depends on the school.

Donald Downs, a member of the tenure review committee in the political science department at the U. of Wisconsin, Madison, says the university looks at student evaluations but places more emphasis on the amount of research a professor completes.

Rutgers U. grants tenure to 60 to 80 percent of the candidates. To his students' surprise, Richard Barr, associate professor of English, landed in the other 40 to 20 percent.

Voted by students as Teacher of the Year and *Rutger Review's* Best Teacher of the Year for two years running, Barr was approved by the English department but was denied tenure in one of the final stages.

Despite a letter-writing campaign, petitions and a hunger strike by two English majors, Rutgers officials still refused to give Barr tenure.

"It's not unusual for somebody to be particularly strong in one area but not in another," says Jean Ambrose, assistant vice president for faculty affairs at Rutgers.

The same thing happened at the U. of Pennsylvania: Three popular English professors were denied tenure despite spotless records with students. The students launched a protest against the university, but still no deal.

Mike Nadel, a senior at Penn and an advocate of forming a student tenure review committee, says the tenure decisions have little to do with balance. Instead, reviews are based on the amount of research conducted by the professor and sometimes on his or her political ideology.

"If you have conservative views, you keep them to yourself until you get tenure," Nadel says.

"If you don't do research at Bowdoin, you don't get tenure, no matter how good a teacher you are," says Emily Church, a junior at Bowdoin College in Maine and news editor of *The Orient*. "Generally, there is little students can do about it."

Just how much input students should have is hotly debated. "I don't think students are always prudent in reviewing faculty," says Joe Crespo, a senior at Duke U. "I get those teacher review slips, and I know when I'm done, I can leave class."

That outcome is harsh for those denied tenure. Although several do go on to other schools where they receive permanent positions, many are disillusioned by the process and turn away from the teaching profession altogether.

"I worked with students by motivating them, engaging them, inspiring them," says one teacher denied tenure at an East Coast school. "Teaching was an experience. It was about redefining knowledge. I hoped there would be a place for that at college. I guess there wasn't."

Julie Blair, a political science and communications major at Hope College, is looking for a tenured position in the field of print journalism. Any takers?

