University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Papers in Communication Studies | Communication Studies, Department of

2001

Making Good Tenure Decisions

Samuel L. Becker
University of Iowa

Kathleen M. Galvin
Northwestern University, k-galvin@northwestern.edu

Marsha Houston
University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa

Gustav W. Friedrich
Rutgers University, gusf@rutgers.edu

Judy C. Pearson
North Dakota State University

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/commstudiespapers

 Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Organizational Communication Commons

Becker, Samuel L.; Galvin, Kathleen M.; Houston, Marsha; Friedrich, Gustav W.; Pearson, Judy C.; Seiler, William J.; and Trent, Judith S., "Making Good Tenure Decisions" (2001). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 154.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/commstudiespapers/154

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication Studies, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Papers in Communication Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Authors
Samuel L. Becker, Kathleen M. Galvin, Marsha Houston, Gustav W. Friedrich, Judy C. Pearson, William J. Seiler, and Judith S. Trent

This article is available at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/commstudiespapers/154

Journal of the Association for Communication Administration
30(2001), 95--103

Making Good Tenure Decisions

SAMUEL L. BECKER, KATHLEEN M. GALVIN, MARSHA HOUSTON, GUSTAV W. FRIEDRICH, JUDY C. PEARSON, WILLIAM J. SEILER, AND JUDITH S. TRENT

WHETHER to recommend the granting or denial of tenure to a faculty member is the most important decision a department makes. It not only has an effect on the professional life of a colleague, it has a major influence on the direction and long-term quality of the department. Therefore, it is essential that the decision be a good one. Although there is no way to absolutely ensure it, since some faculty members greatly improve with time and experience, while others fall apart, we believe the criteria and procedures we suggest can help to substantially increase the probability of a good decision.

Generally, the tenure decision is made in the sixth year of a tenure-track faculty appointment. If a faculty member has been on the tenure track at two institutions, the years of service at the first institution usually count toward those six years, unless the faculty member and his or her current institution agree in writing at the time of appointment that they will not or, in some cases, that only a certain number of them will.

If a faculty member is not making good progress toward meeting tenure requirements, though, it is unwise to delay until the sixth year. The sooner the person is terminated or helped to find another position, the better for him or her and for the department.

CRITERIA FOR TENURE

The criteria for tenure must be appropriate for the institution and the department. The relative weights of teaching, research, and service, for example, should clearly be different for different kinds of institutions. Often, even what counts as teaching, as research, or as service is different. As an obvious example, using the research criteria of a Research I institution for a typical small, liberal arts or community college will lead to bad decisions, as will the reverse.

The criteria for tenure and the procedures and materials that will be used to assess whether a candidate has met or exceeded those criteria must be clearly laid out in writing. All faculty members involved in the tenure process, both new tenure track faculty and senior faculty, must have detailed knowledge of that document; the former so they know what they must accomplish, the latter because they must help to mentor candidates

and, ultimately, vote on their tenure. Included in the tenure document must be such information as whether quality of advising is considered in evaluating teaching, whether unpublished manuscripts are considered in evaluating scholarly productivity, whether papers published prior to joining your faculty or the publication of one's dissertation count. Also, what about publications on which one is the fourth or fifth author? Invited lectures? The department not only needs to be clear on what counts, but also its relative weight in the tenure decision.

Avoid trying to describe the criteria in quantitative terms. Efforts to quantify scholarly productivity or teaching quality are problematic. Valid assessments of research and teaching are necessarily qualitative. It is understandable that young faculty members want to know how many publications are "enough," and senior faculty members find it easier to count publications than to study and evaluate their quality, but quality must be the major criterion. Fortunately, there are some reasonably valid indicators of quality against which one can test judgments. Whether a candidate's publications appear in the major refereed journals is one, whether one's book was published by a university press or a vanity press, whether one's work is cited in the publications of other scholars, and so forth. These indicators can help in assessing quality of scholarship, but nothing can take the place of careful reading and evaluation of all of a candidate's publications by the faculty members who must recommend for or against tenure.

Similarly with the evaluation of teaching quality. Although student ratings of all of a candidate's courses are useful, they are not a substitute for the observation and evaluation by senior faculty members of a sample of class sessions, course syllabi, examinations, other course materials, and the candidate's statement of teaching philosophy. Senior faculty should be better able than students to recognize that there are many ways to be an effective teacher, that all faculty members should not be measured against an inflexible notion of what good teaching is.

PROCEDURES

Tenure procedures must be designed and followed in a way that ensures, to the degree possible, validity, fairness, and equity.

Institutions vary in the flexibility given to departments to develop their own procedures for evaluating junior faculty members for tenure; some have almost total flexibility, others must follow precise procedures laid down by the college or university. In either case, we believe that following the guidelines below can increase the probability of good decisions. It is also advisable, whatever the department's procedures, to have them in writing, to follow them scrupulously, to give copies to all new tenure-track faculty members, and to have the faculty members who will be making the tenure decision review them before beginning that task.

Some departments have standing promotion and tenure (P&T) committees, elected by the faculty each year. In other departments, P&T committees are appointed by the chair. In the latter case, sometimes a P&T committee is responsible for reviewing all candidates for tenure and/or promotion in any given year, at other times the chair appoints a separate committee for each candidate for tenure and/or promotion.

Another practice that varies among institutions is having a non-tenured, but tenure-track faculty member on the P&T committee, along with tenured faculty members. Most departments and institutions, though, require that all members of the committee, and everyone who votes on tenure, be already tenured.

MAINTAINING GOOD RECORDS

As soon as a new, untenured faculty member is hired, the chair of the department, with the help of that faculty member, should begin building a tenure file. New faculty members should also be encouraged to do so. The file should contain all of the syllabi developed by the candidate, all evaluations of teaching, all publications, papers presented at professional meetings, with indications of whether they were refereed, grants and grant submissions, dates and descriptions of service to the department, institution, and disciplinary organizations, and reports of all reviews of the person done prior to the tenure review. Care must be taken to ensure that the file is complete and all data are accurate.

MENTORING

The mentoring of untenured faculty members is extremely important. At one of our institutions, each untenured faculty member has a provost-appointed departmental faculty mentor and a mentor from another academic department. At that institution, there is even a small amount of money available from the provost's office for each mentor to take the new faculty member to lunch or dinner, several university-planned functions for the young faculty members and their mentors, and a yearly program evaluation form for both groups to complete. The data gathered on these forms are mined for ideas to improve the mentoring program.

At most institutions, the mentoring program is more informal, but no less important. Where there is no college or university-wide program, the senior faculty and department chair should be responsible for ensuring that the junior faculty members in their department are adequately mentored.

Quite a different sort of mentoring is done at another of our institutions. There, in the Department of Communication, all tenured faculty members meet individually with each untenured faculty member at least once a year. The untenured faculty member, in advance of the meeting, submits a description of activities/accomplishments in teaching, research, and service, as well as plans for the coming year. The goal of these meetings is for the senior faculty to provide the kinds of advice and assistance that can help the untenured faculty achieve tenure.

Still another department, in addition to the informal mentoring that its faculty does, carries out a formal review of every non-tenured faculty member every year. Two to three senior faculty members are on each of these review committees, with membership rotating each year so that, even before candidates come up for tenure, all of the senior faculty have had the opportunity to closely examine their teaching, research, and service at least once. In a sense, each of these annual reviews is a dry run for the tenure review and they provide guidance to the young faculty member on a regular basis.

Some time prior to the year in which a faculty member is scheduled to come up for tenure, many departments have a mini tenure review, usually without external letters, to provide additional guidance to the candidate or, for some candidates, to help them see that they should not come up for tenure. Some departments do this during the candidate's third year on the faculty; others do it during the year before the formal tenure review. Another function of a third-year review at many institutions is to aid in determining whether to terminate or renew a candidate's contract for another term.

Whatever the type of mentoring, in addition to helping candidates learn to teach as well as they can, and reading and advising on manuscripts they hope to get published, it is essential that the senior faculty help candidates understand how best to present their activities/accomplishments in the tenure file. Everyone coming up for tenure also should

have the benefit of constructive comments from senior faculty on their statements about teaching, research, and service.

There is one serious risk associated with annual reviews and other forms of mentoring that must be kept in mind. Most of us believe that positive reinforcement is an important aid to learning and development, and most untenured faculty members need such encouragement.

However, it is essential that no untenured faculty member be led to believe that his or her teaching, research, artistic work, or service is meeting or exceeding the standards for tenure if it is not. If a candidate is surprised at a negative tenure decision, the senior faculty members, including the department chair, have failed in their responsibilities. It is not always easy to encourage young faculty members without sometimes misleading them about the quality of their work, but it is essential that we do it. Recognizing this problem, some institutions require that if a recommendation against tenure is made that is inconsistent with previous annual evaluations, the administrator of the unit, as part of the recommendation, must submit a written explanation of the inconsistency.

Any serious concerns about a junior faculty member's performance must be clearly indicated to him or her. The earlier in the faculty member's career that this is done, the more time he or she has to take corrective action. Each pre-tenure review that is done should include guidance on what the faculty member should try to accomplish over the next year or years.

Ultimately, whatever the amount and quality of mentoring, it is the responsibility of the untenured faculty member to do conscientious and high quality teaching, produce important scholarly or artistic work (if that is a criterion at his or her institution), and carry a fair share of service responsibilities.

THE FINAL (TENURE) REVIEW

Candidates' statements. To provide a context for the tenure review by both the internal and external reviewers, it is useful to have candidates prepare detailed, personal statements that provide "roadmaps" to their career trajectories in scholarship, teaching, and perhaps service, depending on the importance of the latter in the tenure decision. These documents should be designed to make sense out of the candidates' choices, particularly in scholarship. Some institutions require that these statements be included in the tenure file.

Evaluations of Teaching. The most important evaluations of teaching are those done by peers. If annual reviews have been done, you should have the reviewers' written reports of the classroom observations and the examinations of the candidate's course syllabi, tests, and other materials that were done each year. With these reports, the tenure committee will be able not only to evaluate teaching quality that year, but also growth in teaching quality.

To aid in these evaluations, faculty members should be strongly encouraged to develop teaching portfolios that include everything that might illumine what they taught, how they taught, and the success of their instruction. Among other materials, portfolios should include all syllabi, course assignments, examinations, notes posted on the course web sites, and audiovisual aids used in classes. With these to supplement information gained in class observations, the senior faculty members can assess such factors as the clarity and comprehensiveness of the syllabi, appropriateness of goals and evaluation methods to the course and student level, how innovative and effective the instruction is, and so forth.

Those evaluating faculty members' teaching should also consider efforts they have made to improve their teaching, the amount and effectiveness of their mentoring of

students, their involvement of students as research assistants or even co-researchers, and their encouragement of students to do independent research.

Increasingly, tenure committees are being faced with the problem of how to assess the quality of web-based distance learning packages, since their development is becoming part of the teaching responsibilities of faculty in many institutions. As we gain more experience with such instruction, we must develop reliable and valid methods for evaluating them.

Student evaluations of the candidate's courses are also useful in assessing quality of teaching, but only if there are departmental or institutional norms on each item for different kinds of courses (e.g., large undergraduate lecture course vs. small graduate seminar) and the evaluations for all of the candidate's courses are in the file or, at the minimum, those for a sample of courses chosen by the department chair. When the candidate can select which course evaluations are placed in the file, they are far less useful.

The department should have a policy on whether student opinions other than those on the normal course rating forms should be solicited. For example, the tenure policy should clearly spell out whether letters should be solicited from undergraduate and/or graduate advisees, students who did independent study projects with the faculty member, or a sample of students who have graduated.

Evaluations of Scholarship. The weight given to different types of evidence of scholarly work varies widely among departments and institutions. Some departments, or scholarly areas within departments, place the greatest weight on articles in scholarly journals. This is especially the case in the areas with a social science orientation. Other areas in our departments, largely those with a more humanistic orientation, place the greatest weight on scholarly books. Some departments consider textbooks as scholarly contributions; others consider textbooks as part of the evidence of teaching contributions. Whatever the case in your department, it should be made clear to all new faculty members in the department and regularly reinforced.

A problematic form of scholarly publication these days is the electronic journal. Although tenure committees can read on-line publications, as they read other publications, they do not have the help in evaluation provided by knowing the quality and severity of the peer review required for acceptance in any of them or the rejection level, as we do for the established print publications.

Scholarship evaluations by two different groups are important for a sound tenure review, one by a group of senior faculty from the department and the other by a group of external evaluators.

The department's tenure committee should review and evaluate all of the candidate's scholarly work, independent of the reviews by the external group. In some institutions, the committee is not even permitted to see the external reviews until its own review and report is done. When the senior faculty members vote, however, they should have the benefit of both sets of reviews. These internal reviewers, as well as the external reviewers, should be asked to make their evaluations as detailed and specific as possible, referring to specific materials in the record to support each generalization. Some institutions also ask reviewers to compare candidates to their peers at other institutions.

Because you want the external reviews to be credible with the administration, the reviewers should be selected from institutions and departments that are at least comparable to yours. No one who is or could be perceived as biased, such as the candidate's graduate school adviser or a co-author, should be used.

There is great variation among departments and institutions in the number of external evaluators required. Some departments use as few as three; others as many as ten to twelve. Our guess is that the norm is between four and six. More important than the number of evaluators, though, is consistency for all of a department's candidates for

tenure. Using more for some candidates than for others can lead to charges of unfairness and formal grievances or lawsuits.

The usual practice is for the department chair to request the names of potential external reviewers from both the candidate and the senior faculty of the department. One of our institutions, for example, requests ten names from each. This institution then requires the department to obtain at least six external evaluations and the dean's office gathers three more that are "highly confidential," which means that no one in the department sees them and the college P&T committee only sees redacted versions.

Only a few institutions pay external evaluators. Those that do are likely to find them generally more conscientious. Doing a thorough job of evaluating a faculty member's body of scholarship can be a difficult and time-consuming task, especially if there are many publications and papers to examine.

External reviewers should generally be asked to evaluate only a candidate's scholarly work and, perhaps, service to the profession. They seldom have the information needed to say anything useful about the quality of the candidate's teaching.

Before the final selection of evaluators is made, the candidate should have the opportunity to examine the list and object in writing to anyone he or she believes might be biased. If the department chooses to use that reviewer, despite the objection, the written objection should be forwarded to the administration when the recommendation for or against tenure and all of the accompanying materials are forwarded. A biographical sketch of each of the external reviewers should be among those materials. Some administrators require full vitae of external reviewers; others accept a brief resume of each, such as those found in *Who's Who*. These bios are important for establishing the credibility of these reviewers with faculty members and administrators from other disciplines.

Neither the candidate nor any faculty member other than the department chair should correspond with the reviewers about the task they are being asked to do. This should ensure that all reviewers are given the same information and instructions.

Generally external reviewers can be assured that their identities, if not their reviews, will remain confidential, revealed only to the senior faculty of the department, the collegiate and/or institutional tenure committees, and the administrators who must approve or disapprove the department's recommendation. The degree to which this information will remain confidential varies widely among institutions. At some, the reviews, redacted to conceal the identities of their authors, are only made available to the candidate if he or she is turned down for tenure and files a grievance or sues. At other institutions, the candidate has access to all external evaluations and the identity of their authors, unless he or she waives, in writing, the right to that access. It is the responsibility of the department chair to inform prospective reviewers of the institution's policy. In the case of a lawsuit, of course, it is the court, not the institution's policy, that determines the level of confidentiality, if any.

Evaluating Artistic Work. Many of our departments include faculty members who are artists and have the opportunity to achieve tenure based on their teaching, service, and artistic work, rather than scholarship. The evaluation of their work, especially when that work, is ephemeral, as it is for theatre directors and actors, must be handled differently than the evaluation of scholarship. Some institutions obtain external reviews of that work by bringing highly regarded artists to campus to review any productions a candidate considers especially significant.

Artistic work off campus is generally treated more like scholarly publication. In addition to observation of the work by qualified artists, the quality of the venue is taken into consideration. To state the obvious, greater value is placed on designing a show at the Guthrie in Minneapolis than designing a show at the local community theatre. Newspaper

reviews of performances can also be useful sometimes if they are analytic, rather than simply puff pieces.

For such artists as playwrights and film or video-makers, the procedure is more comparable to the procedures for evaluating scholarship. The department can consider the quality of their outlets-the quality of the festivals which select the films or videos of these faculty members for showing, the awards won at these festivals, or the quality of the theatres that have chosen to produce one's plays. In addition to the senior faculty in the department viewing or reading and evaluating the artistic quality of the films, videos, and plays, external evaluators can be asked to do so.

There is one question faced by departments with major theatre programs for which we do not yet sense any consensus around the country and for which we do not yet have confidence in our answers. That is, how can we provide these artists with enough time working off-campus to continually develop their art and build national reputations in a limited number of years while still maintaining a strong theatre program on campus?

Directing, designing, or acting in a show off campus generally takes a number of weeks or more, especially for directors and actors. We can usually cover each other' classes for a few days, in addition to our own classes, but not for a month or month and a half. In addition, many of our departments have no one, other than the individual needing the off-campus productions, qualified to teach some courses.

The solution to this problem for many departments has been to agree that the artistic contributions of theatre faculty members will be based on their campus productions. This solution, though, ignores the conflict between the department's productions functioning as indicators of the faculty members' artistic talents and their functioning as educational opportunities for theatre students. Directors will cast a show quite differently, depending on which of those is their primary goal.

Service. The importance of service in the tenure decision varies widely among departments. Generally, the more important research is in the decision, the less important is service. In fact, in highly research-oriented departments, non-tenured faculty members should probably be encouraged to devote little time to service, concentrating instead on their teaching and scholarship until after they achieve tenure. Whatever the case, the relative importance of service for the tenure decision must be made clear to young faculty members.

However important it is, though, relative to teaching and research, the department should have a clear policy on what kinds of service count and, if possible, the relative importance of different kinds of service. Work on departmental or institutional committee is usually important. What about service as a committee member or officer in a state, regional, or national professional association? Serving as a reader for a scholarly journal? Being an officer in a local service club or on the local steering committee for the United Way campaign? All of this needs to be spelled out both for the untenured faculty members and for the senior faculty members who will be making the tenure decision.

THE TENURE VOTE

Every institution needs to have a clear policy concerning who can vote on tenure and each department should follow that policy scrupulously and consistently. The policy needs to specify whether faculty members on leave can vote, whether proxy votes from faculty members who did not participate in the discussion of the candidate will count, and whether the department chair votes with the rest of the tenured faculty.

Nothing should be considered or carry weight in the tenure decision that is not part of the record. For example, P&T committees sometimes receive anonymous letters or

comments from individuals who do not want to be identified. None of such materials should be considered by the P&T committee or the departmental faculty.

During the tenure review, a written record should be kept of all relevant discussions and that record and all other materials used in the review, including such materials as reports of yearly reviews, if they were made, should be retained for at least a few years. These materials will become especially critical if a grievance or lawsuit follows a negative tenure decision. Federal regulations require institutions receiving federal funds, which probably includes all of our institutions of higher education, to retain records concerning promotion or termination for at least two years. Some experts suggest retaining records throughout an individual's employment and for seven years thereafter.

In voting on tenure, some institutions require not only the evaluation of a candidate's teaching, research, and service, but also an analysis of how his or her teaching and scholarly interests fit into the department's long-range goals. The tenure decision should not be based solely on the past, the vision and forecast of the future needs to be taken into account. To put this another way, in evaluating someone for tenure, the faculty must look not only at the candidate's achievement to date, but also the likelihood for future development and performance in the kind of department for which the department is striving.

LEVELS OF DECISION-MAKING

In most departments, the report of the P&T committee is received, discussed, and sometimes revised by the tenured faculty members of the department, who then vote for or against tenure. At most institutions, the report and vote go to the department chair who forwards it to the dean, along with his or her independent recommendation. At other institutions, the chair is involved in the vote and the tenured faculty's report and recommendation go directly to the dean.

Most deans have committees on promotion and tenure who review the materials from the department and make an independent recommendation. In some colleges, those committee recommendations are merely advisory and the deans make independent judgments and recommendations to the provost or academic vice president. In other cases, the recommendation of the dean's committee is determinative. In still others, the committee's recommendation and the dean's both are forwarded.

The same procedure occurs in the provost's or academic vice president's office, although that administrator's vote is determinative. Only rarely is there a meaningful review or decision-making beyond that level, at least in the larger public institutions and if there is no grievance or lawsuit. Although the board of regents, trustees, or some other such body must generally approve tenure recommendations before they are official, their reviews and approvals are pro forma in all but the most exceptional cases.

FAIRNESS

Just as tenure reviews must be thorough, they must be fair. The administrator at each level has a responsibility here. In addition, to increase the probability of fairness, at some institutions candidates have the right of access and response to all materials, including recommendations, summaries of discussions, and the outcome of the vote at each step in the process. Other institutions withhold all information until the process is completed. At least one institution gives candidates the right to request written reasons for an adverse recommendation that has been made at any level; some also give candidates the right to request and receive reconsideration of decisions made at the department, college, or institutional level.

Fairness has two sides. Clearly, the process of deciding whether to grant tenure to faculty members must be fair to those individuals. However, it must also be fair to the department and to the students who take courses and seek degrees in the department for the next twenty to thirty years. Because so many faculty members who are turned down for tenure file grievances or sue, some faculties fear turning anyone down for tenure. However, that is the wrong response to the threat. The correct response is to develop relevant criteria for tenure that are as clear as they can be, sound procedures for assessing whether those criteria have been met by a candidate, multiple means to communicate those criteria repeatedly to non-tenured faculty members, and consistent and fair application of those criteria, procedures, and means of communication for all candidates for tenure.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

Samuel L. Becker (Ph.D., University of Iowa, 1953) is the University of Iowa Foundation Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa. He is a former Chair of the Department of Speech and Dramatic Art and Interim Provost at Iowa.

Kathleen M. Galvin (Ph.D., Northwestern University, 1968) is Professor of Communication Studies at Northwestern.

Marsha Houston (Ph.D., University of Massachusetts, 1983) is Professor and Chair of Communication Studies, University of Alabama/Tuscaloosa.

Gustav W. Friedrich (Ph.D., University of Kansas, 1968) is Professor of Communication and Dean of the School of Communication, Information, and Library Science, Rutgers University.

Judy C. Pearson (Ph.D., Indiana University, 1975) is Professor of Communication and Associate Dean of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, North Dakota State University.

William J. Seiler (Ph.D., Purdue, 1971) is Professor and Chair of Communication Studies, University of Nebraska.

Judith S. Trent (Ph.D. University of Michigan, 1970) is Professor of Communication at the University of Cincinnati.