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A Critical Look at the University Tenure and Promotion Process

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Abstract

This opinion piece highlights some perceived problems with traditional institutional approaches to tenure and promotion in university contexts. After outlining these issues, solutions for addressing them are proposed.

Keywords: Promotion Process, Tenure

Introduction

The current system of recognizing academic tenure and promotion in Canadian universities has its origins in the American system that has been in place since 1940. In 1940, the AAUP (American Association of University Professors) produced a Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure. This statement, which has gone through many adaptations and adjustments between its inception in 1915 and adjustments made in 1970, forms the basis of modern conceptions of tenure and promotion across North America.

The concepts of tenure and academic freedom are closely linked. In a university system, if a professor has tenure, the academic security to seek truth through research, and to expose truth through teaching, are theoretically guaranteed to academics. Dismissal of a tenured professor is only possible if there is cause (e. g., an action that results in an injury) or unusual and exceptional circumstances such as financial exigency or program elimination. Academic freedom allows both teaching and learning to proceed in ways that respect the right of academics to seek and expose truth within their fields of expertise.

There are, of course, arguments both for and against the benefits of tenured academic positions in universities. One argument in support of tenured positions is that the security that tenure offers has the potential to attract talented researchers who might otherwise seek employment in private industry where pay and incentives might be more attractive than those typically offered in a university setting. Tenure also provides the security for individuals to pursue research to promote the common social good regardless of how uncomfortable the stages of uncovering truth and good may be for others (notwithstanding ethical issues related to research conduct).

Tenured systems can also find arguments that point to possible weaknesses in the system of promotion toward a tenured position; specifically, those seeking tenure (i. e., in a tenure-track position usually for three to four years before they can apply for tenure) may not reach academic independence during the length of the tenure-track appointment as they might feel the need to appear to agree with those who hold power over their ultimate appointment to tenure. This power could constrain the research and the teaching of the tenure-track professor, effectively putting a chokehold on the research agenda of the junior professor.

The Promotion Process

Once an academic acquires a tenure-track position, the fast paced demand for research productivity kicks in. Many universities award 3 to 6 year tenure track positions unless the candidate negotiates a shorter length of time. If a candidate has acquired a tenure track position and already has a substantial peer reviewed authorship history, it is to the candidate's advantage to negotiate a shorter tenure track timeline since most universities will only allow application for tenure one year before the final year of the tenure-track position (i.e., in the penultimate year). However, most applicants would welcome the longest possible tenure-track position to provide enough time in their appointment for them to establish a research agenda, make professional contacts nationally and internationally, and publish a body of work in peer-reviewed journals and books.

Universities across Canada vary in how they handle the next steps of promotion up the academic ladder. In some jurisdictions, an academic scholar applies for tenure, and, if granted, automatically is promoted to an associate professor position from the usual assistant professor status. In other universities, academics must first achieve tenure before they are considered for promotion, although they may be allowed to apply for both contiguously. Many Canadian universities also state the number of years (usually 3 or 4) that an academic must work at one level after tenure is granted (i.e., either assistant or associate) before the person can apply for promotion to the next level (i.e., either associate or full professor status).

Why is the tenure and promotion process problematic?

There are four practices that make the usual tenure and promotion process quite problematic in a university context. These include: 1) differences in standards across co-terminus faculties in a university; 2) inefficient timelines; 3) "leaky" processes within tenure and promotion committees; and 3) micro-aggression within or across faculties.

1. Differences in Standards across Co-terminus Faculties in a University

Each faculty within a university has a tradition of research processes, grant acquisition standards, authorship, teaching standards, and opportunities for professional service. The traditions differ because the priorities of each faculty differ. For example, in an applied sciences faculty, processes might align with workplace standards within the fields of study (e. g., law enforcement, teaching or nursing), while the standards in an arts and sciences faculty might be focused on discovery and explication of truth and pure sciences might promote a commercial or business focus. Within the university, there may be very few opportunities to have tenure and promotion committee members learn about, discuss, or apply these different standards to the tenure and promotion files they are charged with evaluating. Yet, committee discussions may procede on the basis of an implied and commonly understood assumption of each committee member's understanding and acceptance of these differences. This disparity can lead to committee members talking at cross-purposes and imposing unstated standards on their dossier opinions. In committees composed of six to eight people, charged with assessing several dossiers for tenure and promotion, there would be very little time to explore and clarify different assumptions and establish common standards before assessments of dossiers proceed.

Some universities have dealt with the concern by creating 'standards documents' that purport to even the playing field by exemplifying standards, while avoiding issues of quantification. Such documents introduce another set of issues to the process because they are often not part of any institutional agreement and therefore can be treated dismissively by either committee members, or administration, or by both groups. In such circumstances, it can be mystifying for faculty to try to understand and accept committee decisions as representative of well-informed and impartial judgments.

Even within a single faculty, differences in research foci can introduce a lack of impartiality into the assessment of tenure and promotion dossiers. Typically, social and political agendas align with the mission and focus of both funding agencies and venues for the publication of peer-reviewed journals and books. At various historical times, it may be inequitably easy to acquire funding or publication access for certain topics which can be prioritized over other less current or controversial topics. For example, publically funded school foci (i.e., Education Faculties) on issues such as differentiation, bullying, school violence, literacy and numeracy, Indigenous issues, and French language instruction), and specialization in these areas of research may provide more opportunity for professors to acquire research funding or publish articles. Similarly, the current international concern about addiction may provide expedited opportunities for health related faculty to acquire research funding or publish with agendas that align with this topic. While these are only two examples to exemplify the point, the tenure and promotion process needs to reflect knowledge of such trends across time and locations.

A final consideration that relates to differences in standards is the value that faculty evaluators attach to an applicant receiving research funding. The status and profile of faculty are expanded by the receipt of external funding to complete research and funding is critically necessary for some types of research. For example, scientific research that requires disposable equipment, travel, or sensitive timing because of the need to measure responses in a timely way, is costly. However, there are many approaches to research that are not costly. We need to adjust our

thinking about the value and need for acquiring funding as a pre-condition or an asset of tenure and/or promotion.

2. Inefficient Timelines

In a fast paced university teaching and research environment, the pace of the tenure and promotion process seems positively glacial. I recently described the timeline for the process as "past making a human and headed toward elephant gestation timelines". Most universities accept dossiers in application for tenure and/or promotion in early July of any given academic year. Once dossiers go through the existing processes of assessment by external evaluators, deans, faculty tenure and promotions committees, university promotion committees, and presidential approval, the process can take in excess of 9 months. By any commercial standard, that is too long.

Additionally, tenure and promotion stages through the steps outlined above, may have contractually mandated frameworks for constricting the timelines at each stage but it is also typical for faculty unions to lack processes for dealing with lags that impact faculty. As a result, the combination of external and internal timeline infractions can lengthen an already long process.

3. "Leaky" Processes within Tenure and Promotion Committees

Typically, tenure and promotion committee members and external evaluators sign non-disclosure or confidentiality agreements as a condition of serving within the process. However, such agreements are often compromised by the personal and professional friendships that have been forged among faculty members and across the research community of academia. Such compromises become more likely as the process drags out and applicants become anxious about their status in this high stakes process.

An adjunctive impact to the confidentiality expectation is that faculty who may normally associate socially or professionally, albeit somewhat casually, can feel reluctant to contact colleagues who may have served as external evaluators or internal committee members for fear that their usual overtures may be seen as a form of pressure on a colleague to breech confidentiality. This can have a negative impact on the collegial nature of the institution and the broader academic community in the short term.

4. Micro-aggression within or across Faculties

The term micro-aggression was first used by the psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce, in 1970, to describe the act of discriminating against a non-dominant person or group through actions or words. Dismissiveness of the teaching, research, or service contributions of individuals or whole faculties can create a variant of micro-aggression within a university environment. Such dismissiveness can influence the nature and tone of tenure and promotion committee discussions and cause less respect to be paid to the academic contributions of one or more faculties within an institution(s) if they are seen as 'less than' in an academic sense.

Micro-aggression can also be the result of lack of understanding of various approaches to research methodology or of the relative breadth of topics pursued by researchers in some faculties. This is particularly true if the research foci of individuals reflect changing patterns in the public forums that the faculty serves, as an educator of future employees. These faculties can be subject to "keeping up" pressures as public demands shift and responses to the shifts by faculty might be perceived by other academics as a professor who lacks a defined research agenda rather than as one who has a responsive research agenda that is aligned to the evolution of a profession.

The broad and growing range of research methodologies can create wide variations in responses from academics who are judging dossiers but have little or no knowledge of the research methodologies that may be normal within specific disciplines. Since much of the research that is done in some faculties is quantitative and closely aligned to the scientific method, dossiers that feature exclusive use of qualitative or artistic methods of research and research productively can be difficult to understand and can perhaps even be dismissed as not being true research. While may universities include artistic work as a contractually recognized form of research productivity, these same faculties may not provide training to tenure and promotion committees to help committee members understand the features of various types of creative productivity or the various modes of qualitative research. Both of these forms of lack of understanding by committee members can result in dismissive responses of some dossiers to the career disadvantage of capable academics whose field of study promotes non-quantitative or creative ways of knowing.

Finally, we must acknowledge that not all faculty members enter the role of tenure and promotion faculty representatives with good will. Friction within faculties and among individuals across faculties can cause residual overflow into tenure and promotion committee deliberations. Committee members themselves may not even be conscious of viewing dossiers, as they might view individuals, differently. There is very little structure in current approaches to committee deliberations to weed out this type of unprofessional response but it is often easy to detect in committee deliberations and is in strong evidence when some committee participants resist consensus decision making in the committee discussions. In these contexts, a vote is a vote and it is private. Acknowledged and unacknowledged frictions can show up as isolated negative votes against a faculty dossier and can often seem puzzling to other committee members if the background of the friction is unacknowledged.

What's the solution?

In this opinion piece, four flaws in our current tenure and promotion process have been examined. While other academics may perceive different flaws and many strengths in the traditional processes used in North American universities, the four strongly evident flaws that are pointed out in this opinion piece are the types of concerns that are frequently discussed among faculty. At various times in the academic year, inter-academic discussions about these concerns are predictably evident as hopeful faculty members place their faith and their futures in the hands of colleagues through current processes. The four process flaws that have been

explored here include: 1) differences in standards across co-terminus faculties in a university; 2) inefficient timelines; 3) "leaky" processes within tenure and promotion committees; and 3) micro-aggression within or across faculties.

We wish to propose three solutions that we believe can have the impact of addressing all four of the flaws that we have explored. First, we address the flaw of differences in standards across faculties. We propose that an intensive training in standards be part of the initial meetings of committees. Currently, committees review contract clauses and may review standards documents if they are available in their university. This is inadequate training. Another step that is critically necessary to address this process flaw is to have committee members collectively reexamine past successful and unsuccessful dossiers that are appropriately blinded, and that are used as exemplars for what success with a particular application should present. This step would expose committee members to both qualitative and quantitative evidence in past dossiers and prepare them to apply similar standards to current applications. Of course, such exemplar assessments require a great deal of skill, so it is critical that we generate some effective strategies for using exemplars in the training processes.

Tenure and promotion processes are severely flawed by excessive timelines that are established for the external and internal aspects of the processes. Timelines are influenced by processes. By moving the process of preparing and assessing dossiers for tenure and promotion to electronic formats, we can make the entire process much more time efficient while also having a paperless, environmentally friendly approach to sharing large documents. In addition, the process of having a faculty committee review followed by a university committee review seems redundant and unnecessarily time consuming for both the applicants and the faculties. Since TPU (university level reviews) committees are typically representative and use a representation by faculty population loading model (i.e., the number of members represent the relative size of each faculty in the university) for electing members to the committee, we consider that practice to be the equivalent of having a separate TPF (faculty level committee) assessment prior to a TPU committee being convened. Based on a single committee assessment process, a much more efficient timeline for applicant assessments becomes possible.

We propose the following changes (Table 1) to restrict and constrain timelines for the processes so that they are more efficient and less stressful for applicants, and adjunctively less demanding for the universities.

Table 1. Timeline proposal for an electronically submitted and single committee assessment of tenure and promotion dossiers

Timeline	Action
July 1	Applicant submits electronic dossier.
July 20	Deans send out electronic dossiers to selected external evaluators.
August 15	External evaluators return recommendations and delete electronic files of dossier.
September 1	Deans provide letters to committee and applicant with their recommendations.
September 2-15	Representative committee members receive electronic copies of dossiers, external recommendations, and dean's responses for assessment and review.
September 16 – October 31	Representative university committee meets to deliberate on files.
November 1	VPAR (or other upper administration chair of the committee) receives representative university committee recommendations for each candidate.
November 5	VPAR sends letters of recommendation to each candidate.
November 15	President notifies each candidate of tenure and/or promotion decisions.

This proposed timeline reduces the time for the tenure and promotion process to five and half months, from the current usual timeline of eight or more months. Individual universities can then engage in the task of determining when new tenure or promotion status can be recognized through contracted conditions. While it has been traditional practice to start new status recognition for faculty in the new academic year (July 1 usually), with a shortened electronic

process and only one internal committee, it is reasonable to pursue mid-year (e.g., January 1) recognition of new faculty status in the future.

Another issue that can influence the tone and intent of faculty committee review of dossiers is probably the most difficult to discuss and the most difficult to recognize. Since the tenure and promotion process is a very high stakes process for every applicant, if it does result in the tenure or promotion of the individual applicants, a predictable outcome is anger and even revenge seeking on the part of the disappointed applicant. We recognize that this is not an often spoken about phenomenon so we expect that this statement will and perhaps has caused some concern among professionals. While we would all like to think that such responses would not be the case in professionals, it is naïve to assume that this type of reaction does not exist. We have witnessed instances of a disappointed applicant assuming a position on an internal committee in the year following their disappointing outcome and addressing their ire and disappointment toward every dossier they then review. This is a malignant outcome of the process of peer review in this context but many examples of this come to mind from recent internal situations and this clearly does not benefit the process or the institution. We have also witnessed situations where faculty members who have achieved a status position through the process of promotion work within committees to promote negative views of other applicants to the same status.

To help avoid this situation in tenure and promotion processes, we propose that un-awarded faculty (i.e., those who were denied either tenure or promotion or both) be unable to assume a role on the internal tenure and promotion committee of the institution until five years after their denial. This time limitation allows a responsible period for cooling off but also provides a reasonable amount of time where we could be almost certain that faculty who were not successful initially have now re-applied for the tenure or promotion and been successful. Such a timeline would help to restore some of the professional integrity of the deliberation processes that can be influenced by unprofessional intent.

Similarly, we propose that faculty alone should control the identification of conflicts of interest with a member of an internal tenure and promotion committee. Currently, when deans must be approached with a concern about a conflict and give their consent to the declaration of conflict that is requested by the tenure and/or promotion applicant, the applicant is put in a position of having to be unprofessional to support their claim. Instead, if all claims of conflict were respected and the tenure and promotion committee chair dealt with acquiring all alternative committee members in the case of a conflict declaration by the applicant, professionalism and privacy are preserved.

Final Thoughts

We recognize that everyone who reads this position paper may not agree with our proposed model for revising current tenure and promotion processes and may not even agree with some of the tenants and beliefs on which we base this position. However, we think that anyone who has gone through existing tenure and promotion processes in many universities is likely to recognize the difficult and unreasonable timelines attached to most processes and may have

some shared concerns about the problems we have identified with current processes. It is time to start the discussion about reviewing standard practices related to tenure and promotion, recognize the limitations and inherent unprofessional practices that the process may allow, and work toward a fairer and more efficient process.

Reference

1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure: AAUP