

## The Provost as Gatekeeper

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By LOUIS V. PARADISE

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The toughest and most enduring decisions made by a provost usually involve promotion and tenure. As chief academic officer, the provost is responsible for ensuring the overall quality of the educational enterprise and the fairness of the tenure process.

To outsiders, tenure seems an overly complicated and exceedingly drawn-out process. To most tenured insiders, it is a reasonable and collegial requirement to obtain a life-long perch in the academy. To many untenured faculty members, it is a nerve-racking, arbitrary, and uncollegial event, fraught with procedural flaws, petty politics, and, on occasion, bias.

For me, as a provost, it was all of those descriptions rolled into one. It was like a marathon grading session where the assigning of an "F" was always gut-wrenching.

Over my 11 years as a provost, I probably made close to 200 promotion-and-tenure recommendations. The ones that involved only promotions were always less complicated, since any faculty member whose bid for full professorship was denied could, and usually did, simply try again.

Tenure cases, however, were difficult on all of the participants -- faculty members, department heads, deans, and administrators. Even when all of the various parties were in agreement -- for example, to deny a candidate's bid for tenure -- the decision was still difficult. After all, a negative vote meant letting go of someone who had worked at the university for years.

The provost's role in those determinations often became that of gatekeeper and fact-finder. Here are some of the lessons I learned about the tenure-and-promotion process from all of my years as a gatekeeper.

**Read between the lines.** The departmental vote tallies and the evaluations written by department heads and deans often require close scrutiny.

The evaluations supporting a favorable recommendation for tenure might sound positive, but often unflattering or negative comments are buried in the text. You might read sentences like this: "While the candidate has done sufficient work for tenure, he is capable of much more." Or, "I would have expected to see greater initiative taken by the person." Or, "While the faculty vote was favorable, it was far from unanimous."

Alternatively, I have read evaluations that cited many reasons to grant a candidate tenure -- excellent teaching and service, good research, and a split, but favorable faculty vote -- only to recommend against tenure because a 5-to-4 vote was seen as too divisive in the department. Tell that to the candidate, as well as to the U.S. Supreme Court which has functioned well on 5-to-4 votes.

I have also seen many evaluations that required no reading between the lines, but rather were so unmistakably hostile or inflammatory as to shout bias.

Different departments often vote on tenure-and-promotion cases in different ways. As a provost, you will need to scrutinize the voting procedures as well as the way the vote is reported and the vote itself. In my experience, that scrutiny is not usually found in the evaluations from the dean or department head.

In some departments, the chairman may vote two or three times on a case -- as a faculty member, as the chairman, and then again as a member of a dean's advisory committee. So it's important to know not only the vote, but who voted and how often.

I remember one department in which the faculty members would meet for a secret vote on a tenure case, and then the department head would meet separately with each professor to get the individual votes. Often, the vote summaries from those two meetings were different. Reading through all the data sometimes seemed like a social-psychology experiment.

Another perplexing issue occurs when faculty members abstain or don't even show up to vote. I suppose there are appropriate reasons for abstentions and absences, but to me, selecting the people who will be your colleagues for the next few decades seems far too important to skip. I remember one department where the vote on a close case was three in favor, three against, three abstentions, and two absences. Even my learned advisory committee was hard pressed to determine what that vote meant.

**Make careful use of external reviewers.** Reports from external reviewers can be helpful in evaluating a tenure file, but you have to be cautious about which materials you send to the reviewers and about how you use the results.

In my experience, external reviews were almost always positive, regardless of the productivity of the applicant. Still, from time to time, concerns would arise: about reviewer credentials; about stacking the deck for or against a tenure candidate; about selecting friends, relatives, co-authors, or former advisers as external reviewers. Look carefully at any relationships between the candidate and the reviewers; I've found that the most useful reviews are usually written by people with no personal ties to the tenure candidate.

Another lament I heard on occasion: "My field is so specialized that no one can appropriately evaluate my work." That's just goofy. There is no peerless tenure candidate. The reject bins of scholarly journals are filled with articles from scholars who claimed their work could not be appropriately evaluated. In reality I was always grateful, and surprised, by how readily academics would agree to serve as unpaid evaluators.

Ultimately there is no secret to making sense of the external reviews; it just requires vigilance.

**Read credential packets closely.** I encountered a great variation, independent of discipline, in the quality of the packets assembled by tenure candidates. To me, it was shocking to read a CV that was

sloppily prepared, had numerous misspellings and grammatical errors, or had no apparent organization. While that happened infrequently, it's difficult to understand why it happened at all.

In general, CVs suffer from three common maladies: inflation, deflation, or plain old error. Inflation was the most common. A CV would be packed with all manner of information filling page after page. Letters to the editor are not refereed publications, nor are dictionary entries, book reviews, or test questions for a textbook -- in my humble opinion anyway.

Books or articles from years past that were never published are not appropriate CV material. I actually had one chairman argue that publishing a book in his discipline was getting so difficult that it was common for people to write books that didn't get published and hence those works certainly belonged on a CV. Personally, I'd want to hide that work!

CV deflation occurs less frequently. It's when poor productivity is passed off as acceptable. For example, a candidate might provide little or no evidence of good teaching or service, and make the case for tenure based on a single book, book contract, or external grant.

**Be as diplomatic as possible in overruling other administrators.** When decision makers at the lower levels of the process disagree about a case, one or more people must be overruled. I always brought the parties who were at odds to a meeting with my advisory committee where each of them got the chance to argue his or her point and answer questions. Those meetings clarified the material and often were very helpful to me and my advisory panel in making the ultimate decision.

If, as the saying goes, a university is only as good as its faculty, then perhaps a faculty is only as good as its provost.

*Louis V. Paradise is a professor of educational leadership, counseling, and foundations at the University of New Orleans. He served as provost and executive vice chancellor of the university for 11 years, until he stepped down last June.*

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