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Oct. 7 [Reality Check](#)

Trustees and Tenure

By [John V. Lombardi](#)

Tenure conversations, those hardy perennials, spring up among public university trustees on somewhat predictable cycles, provoking a ritual engagement well known to veteran academic administrators.

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The cycle often begins when a new trustee looks carefully at the bundle of tenure recommendations that come from the campus, or multiple campuses of university systems, each year. These carefully crafted recommendations look remarkably similar. The recommendations praise all candidates for their excellence in teaching, research and service; all candidate files have glowing excerpts from letters solicited from outside reviewers; and the recommendations always outline the candidates' publications, teaching accomplishments and service achievements.

In addition, in most public university settings, this summary includes other information on the process, including the vote totals for and against each candidate at the department, college and university levels. Although on some occasions there may be a split vote, most tenure recommendations come forward with very large majorities in favor at all levels.

Trustees do not quite know what to make of these summaries. Should they try to understand the careers of the people proposed for tenure? Should they worry that all the recommendations say almost exactly the same things in the same ways, implying perhaps a routine approval process rather than a rigorous review? What is their responsibility as trustees in approving these tenure recommendations, which usually imply 25 to 30 years of continuing institutional financial obligation? How can trustees have a useful opinion when they have not participated in the process and do not see the full dossiers? What would be the consequences of failing to approve a tenure recommendation endorsed by the president?

Uncomfortable with the rubber stamp character of these decisions, the new trustee will typically put the question of the entire tenure process up for discussion. While a few may actually challenge the concept of tenure, most trustees, whether they like it or not, recognize that a frontal attack on this core concept of the American academy is a futile exercise. Even so, they think, "Well, maybe we must have tenure, but if these campuses never turn anyone down, maybe we need to make the process more rigorous." So they ask for data on how many candidates the campus rejects and on the percent of a department's faculty that is already tenured. They ask how it is that everyone's file they see has excellent ratings.

University administrators respond in similarly predictable ritual fashion. "We are very rigorous," they say. "We wash out the weak cases before they get to the tenure decision, by advising those who perform below our

standards that they should seek employment elsewhere.” In most universities, some form of annual review of all non-tenured faculty exists, and these reviews, we tell the trustees, ensure that only the best candidates for tenure survive. “This rigorous prior screening,” we say, “explains why we approve almost all those who come up for tenure.”

When the concerned trustee expresses some skepticism about this rationale for the high success of candidates for tenure and asks for data on the failure rate, the administration falls back to a comprehensive review of the process by which institutions acquire faculty. The screening, they say, begins with a national recruitment of only the best candidates. So the campus starts out with presumptive winners and has already rejected most of the potential losers.

Clever administrators calculate the failure rate for tenure by counting from the time of first hiring, especially if the campus uses the lecturer as an entry-level position sometimes converted to tenure track assistant professor. They demonstrate that of all those with Ph.D.'s or almost Ph.D.'s hired for teaching purposes, quite a few never make it to the tenure decision point.

The administration outlines the elaborate bureaucracy and review processes that allow only the best to survive the ordeal and provides reams of information on the process. Department-specific criteria (articles matter in some departments, books in others, for example) produce multiple versions of guidelines used throughout the institution. Examples of the documentation required by the college or school and the paperwork sent to the provost and then on to the president fill the package provided the trustees. With a final flourish, the campus hands over the elaborate campuswide description of promotion and tenure guidelines established by faculty committees and approved by presidents and often the board of trustees itself.

The determined trustee may ask for a policy discussion by the board, and the board usually agrees. A meeting takes place, and in systems, there can be many provosts and chancellors or presidents, as well as a battery of system officials, all who bring expertise, experience, data, and perspectives.

In the discussion, the trustee learns that the process is complicated and that the decisions reflect expert judgments. In a nice way, the assembled administrators gently inform the trustee that in general board members do not know enough to evaluate the full dossiers of the candidates because the subject matter is well beyond trustee expertise in most cases (as it is beyond the expertise of most administrators as well).

The administrators make clear that absent this tenure process conducted as it is, replicated with minor variations at almost all competing public institutions of higher education, no campus can compete for good faculty because good faculty will only come to a place that does tenure exactly the way the university does it. Finally, someone mumbles about lawsuits, union contracts and other nasty consequences of failing to sustain the status quo.

At the end of the meeting, everyone agrees that tenure is a complicated and essential thing. They agree that the institution must be conscientious and careful because the investment implied by a tenure decision is a major commitment. They agree that it is not good for a department to be filled entirely by tenured or non-tenured faculty, but they also allow that it is a bad idea to have rigid tenure quotas. The trustees leave the meeting recognizing that this is beyond their ability to control, frustrated that they cannot get a grip on the process, concerned that the institution may not be doing the right thing in a rigorous enough way, but completely without any mechanism to address the issue.

The administrators go home, having spent great amounts of time and killed many trees for the paperwork, and report to their faculty that they have once again held off the trustee philistines who would have destroyed, absent the strong stance of the administration, that most cherished characteristic of academic appointment, the permanent tenured professorship.

The hardy perennial has once again flowered and died, to lie dormant until the next season of trustee discontent.

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