**Different Paths to Full Professor**

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Last month, E. Gordon Gee mentioned to the [Associated Press](http://www.cleveland.com/nation/index.ssf/2010/02/osus_president_gordon_gee_chal.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) that he thought it was time to reconsider the way tenure is awarded. The wire story got a lot of attention, especially given that Gee, president of Ohio State University, wasn't suggesting abandoning tenure at all, but rethinking the criteria on which it is awarded.

Ohio State officials were quick to caution at the time that Gee wasn't making specific proposals, but was trying to get people thinking about an important topic. In fact, though, Ohio State is embarking on discussions on how to change the way professors are evaluated for promotion to full professor. University officials argue that, as in tenure reviews, research appears to be the dominant factor at that stage, despite official policies to weigh teaching and service as well.

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Not only does Ohio State want to end the all-out dominance of research considerations in reviews for full professor, but the university wants to explore options where some academics might earn promotions based largely on research (and have their subsequent careers reshaped with that focus) while others might earn promotions based largely on teaching (and similarly have career expectations adjusted). Both could earn the title of full professor.

Further, the university wants to pay attention to questions of impact -- for both teaching and research. The concept in play would end the myth that candidates for full professor (and maybe, someday, candidates for tenure) should be great in everything. Why? Because most professors aren't great at everything.

Using a religious analogy in an interview, Gee said that there should be "multiple ways to salvation." Associate professors should be able to find "their real callings" and to focus on them, not fearing that following those passions will doom their chances of promotion for deviating from an equal balance between research, teaching and service. Ohio State's provost, Joseph A. Alutto, has started working with faculty members on redefining promotion guidelines, and faculty leaders are backing the effort.

And while many college leaders talk about a desire to reward faculty members on factors beyond traditional measures of research excellence, actually shifting promotion criteria is rare at research universities.

"It could be revolutionary if we do this, and then others do it. We could really escape from some of the limitations of the system" in place now, said Sebastian D.G. Knowles, a professor of English and associate dean for faculty and research in the arts and humanities.

In a recent speech to the University Senate, Alutto outlined a path to a different approach for the promotion to full professor. He started by noting the traditional teaching/research/service demands for tenure, and stressed that he favored continuation of tenure. "Without the assurances provided by tenure, all of us in the academy would be constantly in danger of speaking only the current orthodoxy, for seeing the world in limited ways," he said.

When it comes time to promote to full professor, he said that it seems that Ohio State just wants "more of the same" in more high quality research, more great teaching and more service. But if that's the official policy, the de facto situation, he said, is that the focus is on research. Once research eminence is verified, teaching and service must be found only to be "adequate."

"This approach is insidiously harmful," Alutto said. "First, it generates cynicism among productive faculty, as they realize the 'game' being played. Second, it frustrates productive faculty who contribute to their disciplines and the university in unique and powerful ways other than -- or in addition to -- traditional research. Third, it flies in the face of everything we know about the need for a balanced portfolio of skills to achieve institutional success."

Gee said that his view is that the university needs outstanding work in research, teaching and service, and that divisions or areas of study within the university need outstanding work in those areas, but that the current system presumes that every individual can provide all of them in equal measure.

Alutto said that the key missing element to giving teaching and service a fair shot at equal consideration in promotions to full professor is measurement of impact, which is easier for research. He said that if good criteria could be developed, not only would teaching-related activities be rewarded, but so would research that has practical use.

"Measuring impact is always difficult, particularly when it comes to teaching and service," he said. "But it can be done if we focus on the significance of these activities as it extends beyond our own institution -- just as we expect such broad effects with traditional scholarship. Thus, indicators of impact on other institutions, recognition by professional associations, broad adoption of teaching materials (textbooks, software, etc.) by other institutions, evidence of effects on policy formulation and so on -- all these are appropriate independent indicators of effectiveness."

Gee stressed that once such measures are established, it will be clear that promoting a faculty member to full professor based primarily on teaching would not mean any lessening of the rigor required for advancement; that it was simply a matter of having a way to apply that rigor to teaching and not research alone.

Alutto said that this broader focus would make it easier for departments to agree with various tenured faculty members on stages in their careers, such that someone might focus more on creating a new curricular offering for a period of a few years, and someone else might be at a critical juncture of research and want to focus on the lab. Faculty jobs could be restructured accordingly, but not universally, so that different professors would have more widely varying divisions of their duties (in the way Ohio State already has such options in its medical school and some other programs).

"This gives an opportunity for individuals to say: What's the passion I have and what can I do at this point in my career?" Alutto said.

Alutto said that some of the same principles might also be used to reform tenure criteria. But one caution he had was that -- because tenure is a "30 or 40 year commitment" by the university -- there may be a need to be sure of more of a mix of talents in the candidate, since the university's needs may be hard to predict so far into the future.

Timothy Gerber, a professor of music education at Ohio State, and chair of the Faculty Council, said that he is generally hearing enthusiasm about considering alternate paths to full professor status. Comments by Gee "certainly got everyone's attention and people are saying that it's time we take a look at this."

Gerber said he agrees that contributions to a discipline may extend beyond traditional publications. For example, he is the co-author of a music textbook used in high school. "I think we have had an impact," he said. "Thousands of teachers are teaching differently, and hundreds of thousands of students are having contact with content they would not have had," he said.

In many ways, Gerber said, the idea of "counting" such contributions in faculty evaluations is an embrace of Ernest Boyer's ideas about "the scholarship of teaching," ideas that have had much more influence outside research universities than within them.

Knowles said that the only "pitfall" he saw was concern that teaching might be too easy for someone to use to justify promotion. "There is always some group of students for whom you are a magical teacher," he said. But if university leaders follow through on their goal of creating mechanisms for measuring the impact of teaching contributions, Knowles said he was "fully supportive."

"I think the worst thing we can do right now is stay where we are," he said. "We need to shake up the way we promote associate professors."

-- Scott Jaschik