Perceptions of Life on the Tenure Track

By David A. Verrier

It's like we [the tenured faculty] have this exclusive club, and if you can pass our initiation, you can get in. But if you don't pass it, and sometimes all the rules aren't clear, then you can't get in. (A 35-year old female in a humanities department, fourth year).

My own sense is that you're on very unstable ground as an assistant professor. You really are not regarded. (A 40-year old male in a pure science department, third year)

The whole tenure and promotion process is in the front of every assistant professor's mind, bar none. (A 35-year old male in applied technology, fourth year)

I'm convinced that everybody gets more and more paranoid as tenure review approaches. (A 35-year old male in a humanities department, fourth year)

. . . here tenure review doesn't involve teaching that much. You could be a lousy teacher and a good researcher, and be tenured and be set upon your students forever. (a 47-year old female in an applied social science, fifth year)

To think, "Well I'm going to do five articles, then I'll squeak by here, and I'll be here for the rest of my life . . . " No, that isn't the way to approach this problem. The only way to protect yourself in this kind of business is to do as much as you can. (A 35-year old male in an applied social science, second year)

These statements, made by assistant professors at a research

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How do junior faculty perceive the academic tenuring system impacting upon their personal and professsional lives?

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Untenured faculty often deal with ambiguous measures of success, isolation, low job satisfaction, and high levels of stress.

deep-seated concern over what it takes to *become* and what is means to *be* a faculty member.

Scholars variously describe a "frustrated and dispirited professoriate" (Bowen and Schuster, 1986) experiencing a "crisis of purpose," urgently in need of a "more creative view" of their work (Boyer, 1990) and a "re-examination of priorities" (Edgerton, 1993). But themes appear to converge around the pressures and isolation facing young academics and the impact that the process can have upon their academic work and personal lives.

This pressure and stress facing young faculty is one area that has increasingly attracted scholarly attention over the years (Baldwin and Blackburn, 1981; Gmelch et al., 1986; Olsen, 1993; Ragland-Sullivan and Barlow, 1981; Seldin, 1987; Sorcinelli and Gregory, 1987). Numerous studies suggest that new, untenured faculty often deal with ambiguous measures of success, feelings of isolation, low job satisfaction, and high levels of stress (Baldwin and Blackburn, 1981; Boice, 1991; Fahrer, 1978; Klapper, 1969; Mager and Myers, 1982; Rice, 1980; Reynolds, 1988, 1993; Sorcinelli, 1985, 1988; Whitt, 1991).

Regarding job-related stress, for instance, research findings suggest that higher stress levels are associated with lower rank, untenured status, and particular disciplines (Gmelch et al., 1986). A principle source of stress in faculty lives has been noted to be "adjusting professional work and personal living so that neither is slighted and both are fulfilled" (Sorcinelli and Gregory, 1987, p. 43).

The more complex, integrated role of faculty at research universities also tends to stimulate particularly high levels of stress (Fahrer, 1978; Olsen, 1993). Lastly, if you are a member of a specific faculty subgroups such as women (Clark and Corcoran, 1986; Hornig, 1980; Menges and Exum, 1983; McElrath, 1993; Witt and Lovrich, 1988), minorities (Blackwell, 1988; Bourguignon et al., 1987), and part-timers (Abel, 1984; Wilke, 1979), your situation is likely to be even more difficult.

Of the variety of "stressors" influencing faculty, the first and

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primary cause of stress for those at research institutions has been noted to be the area of reward and recognition (Gmelch et al., 1986) fueled by the perceived discrepancy between the relative weight given to teaching, research, and service in promotion and tenure decisions.

A Carnegie Foundation National Survey of Faculty in 1989 (Boyer, 1990) revealed that the pressure to publish has reached peak levels. While 21 percent of the faculty surveyed in 1969 strongly agreed that it is difficult to acquire tenure without publishing, by 1989 the number had more than doubled to 49 percent.

Tenure seemed an almost routinely approved rite of passage during the growth years of higher education in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Lewis, 1980; Shulman, 1979; Bowen and Schuster, 1986). But faculty who acquire tenure-track positions in today's academic climate must prepare for what will be for some an enduring "trial," as well as consider the possibility that tenure may be denied. This fear only escalates the anxiety of what has already been described in the literature as a precarious, intimidating, and uncertain process.

Perceptions of Tenure Review

My intent in designing this research was to identify a small cohort of junior faculty and to acquire an in-depth understanding of how they view and are dealing with academic tenure review.

The method and design of this study was informed by numerous theoretical perspectives—for example, socialization theory, organizational culture. The interview methodology selected (Seidman et al., 1983) was not intended to "get answers to questions," "test hypotheses," or "evaluate" in the sense that these terms and phrases are traditionally used. Rather, the intent was to examine the perceptions of individual faculty in depth and detail so as to better understand their behaviors, attitudes, and experiences.

It is assumed that the phenomenon of tenure review has the

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major properties of a status passage (Glaser and Strauss, 1971) including temporal, directional, and actor-specific dimensions. It is viewed as complex, variable, and incapable of being framed in a single way that corresponds to a universal form.

All persons develop unique ways of making sense of their situation based upon their beliefs, background, and prior experience. As a rite of passage shared by participants, tenure review serves in this study as a common focus for a more in-depth exploration of their lives.

Eighteen faculty members from a single research university form the core of this study. These participants were criterion-base selected according to willingness to participate and representativeness within three main areas of possible comparison:

Gender—nine women, nine men.

Tenure stage—five early (first or second) years; eight mid (third and fourth) years; five late (fifth and beyond) years.

Discipline—five natural sciences, four applied sciences, four humanities, and three applied social sciences.

The age of participants range from 32 to 48 years, with the females approximately five years older (mean of 40.7 compared to 35.4) than males on the average. Nine out of the 18 had some form of prior affiliation with the current employing institution—for example, as an undergraduate/graduate student or as an administrator—and five were hired into split appointments with other academic or non-academic units.

Over the course of one year I collected data through three in-depth, tape recorded interviews with each participant. The interview sequence was designed to elicit information about their pasts, their current work experience, and what meaning their experiences as tenure-track faculty has had for them.

After I transcribed and coded the 54 interviews, I developed a comprehensive coding scheme of over 100 codes clustered within eight categories reflecting the theoretical interests of the study. I then conducted disciplined categorical readings, notating of tran-

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scripts, and sorting via computer software. This allowed me to isolate text domains and proceed with the analysis.

I isolate in this article the narratives of only two of the 18 research participants. This is an attempt to preserve, I believe, some sense of the context and integrity of individual narratives in this research. The aim of this methodology: to gather vivid and revealing narratives, resulting in data that has the potential to be meaningful, relevant, and “connective” (Seidman et al., 1983) for faculty in similar contexts—is enhanced by this decision. I further believe that these two individuals best represent the type of experiences and perceptions shared by many of the other 16 participants in this research.

Brief biographies of Mary and Bob (pseudonyms) follows.

Mary

Mary is a 35-year-old assistant professor in her fourth year at the current institution in a department that is classified within the humanities. Although she describes neither parent as “an academic,” all three siblings attended college. Mary worked as a journalist and in the hotel business before pursuing masters and Ph.D. work. Upon completing her doctorate, she accepted her current position over an offer from a small liberal arts college. Mary is single without children.

Bob

Bob is a 35-year-old assistant professor, also in his fourth year in a department that is classified within the applied sciences. Growing up in the Midwest, he was raised in—what he describes as—an “essentially blue-collar family.” He spent six years on the East Coast working for two private sector firms before pursuing doctoral studies. He chose to seek an academic position despite offers and opportunities to return to the private sector. Bob is married with two children.

It should be remembered that this research does not purport to

Academic rank is but one of a variety of lenses faculty use to distinguish themselves from their colleagues.

describe the lives and experiences of all junior faculty at major research universities. Nor does it put forth claims about the inter-workings of academic departments, processes and procedures of the academic tenuring system, or comprehensively describe the academic reward system. The research simply attempts to present perspectives into academic life through the perceptions of 18 junior faculty.

Life on the Tenure Track

Participants' tales of life in their academic departments primarily center around perceptions of interpersonal relationships among faculty colleagues. Many describe much of their day-to-day business as influenced by interactions with colleagues as well as perceived status and prestige distinctions in the department.

Of these distinctions, academic rank is but one of a variety of lenses participants use to distinguish themselves from their colleagues. Beyond commonly used labels—junior/senior, tenured/non-tenured—participants refer to such notions as "the young turks" versus "the old warriors," "the teachers" versus "the researchers," and "the professionals" versus "the scholars," among others.

Most participants feel a connection with other junior faculty in the midst of the tenure process. This appears to be, in part, a function of the composition or placement of peers in the tenure process or the basic demographics of the department. For Bob, the boundaries of what he terms his "cohort group" fluctuate depending upon his vantage point. He responds to my question regarding who he considers to be in his cohort:

> Basically assistant professors I would consider a cohort group, but I'm not counting all assistant professors. I'm counting a sub-set of those—that is, those who were hired either after me or within about a year before me. So we're the ones that are basically in competition, you might say—if you want to look at it that way—for tenure at this

Examining the combination of assistant professors going up for final review, the demographics of the department have Bob on edge.

> point. We're all the ones most concerned about this problem. We're the ones that are either going up next year, or the year after that.

For Bob, those he includes in the "cohort group" are viewed by him as "in competition" for tenure. As he examines the combination of assistant professors "going up" for final tenure review, the demographics of the department have him on edge:

> . . . next year there will be a pretty good number going up. The year after, there will be a pretty good number. Whether I go next year or the year after doesn't matter. There will be a fair number in each case . . . We have quite a large number of assistant professors who are right on the threshold of that decision process, so as another person [in his department] . . . describes it, all hell's going to break loose around here pretty soon.

Bob's tale of strained dynamics of competition among tenure-track colleagues resurfaces at a point later in the conversation:

> The person who mentioned this concept [that "all hell's going to break loose around here pretty soon"] to me, I think, was sort of subtly suggesting that I may want to defer going up so that I don't go up early . . . because I conceivably could damage somebody else's—not his, somebody else's—chances. I don't think that's the case. I mean, jokingly, one other person who will go up next year—and therefore would go up with me if I go early—this other person jokingly said, "I don't want you going up next year." Why not? "I don't want your file going up at the same time as mine. I don't want them put next to each other." But I think he was making a joke—at least I hope he was, anyway.

Bob appears to not want to believe that the latter colleague was serious in his perhaps not-so-subtle suggestion that Bob defer "going up" for his final sixth year review. He admitted to me that these dynamics have an influence upon how he anticipates his own

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chances for successfully acquiring tenure.

Competitive Aspects

The majority of participants in this research, including Mary and Bob, appear so preoccupied with the composition of their cohort and the timing of their reviews that it influences the way they think about their own chances of acquiring tenure.

Mary found it difficult in our conversations to not compare herself to her peers:

> I think we all sort of feel bound in some way, because we're in the same precarious situation. But I think we also feel competitive to a certain extent. There is the question whether there will be room for four people, or whether people will, maybe not consciously but unconsciously, make comparisons between us and say, 'Well, I like her but I don't like him.' Whereas if we had come up singly, we would have been judged on our own merits. So there is that question.

Mary finds herself perplexed and concerned as the topic of conversation in social situations extends to whether individuals will or will not be judged on their own merits.

A preoccupation with the tenure experiences of colleagues not only focuses on members of the perceived "cohort group," but also on forerunners who have recently been through stages of the tenure process. Anticipating her fourth year review, Mary's recalls her feelings of trailing in the wake of an identifiable group of colleagues:

> So there will be four of us coming up in the spring for fourth-year review. The scary thing was, the first year we were here, three people were let go at the fourth-year review. And I think the department was so worried that we would get the wrong message because they had a number of people come around to us and say 'Look, these were the circumstances why these people didn't get tenure, and we don't hire anybody that we don't think has a

Competitive aspects of these academic cultures appear to be reinforced and propagated by senior faculty and administrators.

> chance of getting tenure.' So they tried to reassure us along those lines. But that was really scary. Three people came up for fourth-year review, and none of them got it. And so you started worrying about whether what they were telling you was really true.

The experience of forerunners appears to have had a long-term influence on Mary, particularly as she tries to gauge her own prospects for success. The aftermath of colleagues being "let go" at the fourth-year review are feelings in Mary of fear and suspicion. Not knowing how to interpret the gestures of senior faculty, she questions their justifications and the veracity of what they have been telling her all along.

Competitive aspects of these academic cultures appear to be also reinforced and propagated by the sometimes subtle but often more overt departmental practices engaged in by senior faculty and administrators. Examples noted by participants in this research include the way office space is allocated, how merit raises are calculated, how access to advising doctoral students is monitored, and how public pronouncements are made during faculty meetings contrasting the research output levels of departmental members.

But in some of my conversations with participants, I picked up a sense of how more subtle interactions with colleagues leave lasting imprints, particularly statements made by senior faculty that are perceived as threatening. Consider Bob's reaction to what he perceived to be a senior colleague's devaluing of Bob's specialty within the discipline:

> I have occasionally been stunned at the perception of some of the older faculty. I have been told that what I do isn't, in their opinion, [part of the discipline] and why am I here [in the department]—'Shouldn't you be across the street at [a related department]?' And I view those kinds of perceptions as dangerous to me, dangerous to my well-being, because if they don't think what I do is [part of the discipline], then they don't think it's very important to the

Performance appraisal pressures are complicated by, among other things, complex interpersonal dynamics among colleagues.

> mission of this department. And they don't lose any sleep if I disappear.

For Mary, on the other hand, junior-senior faculty dynamics are complicated by a perceived reluctance on the part of senior faculty to get "too close" to junior faculty. This is illustrated by her perceptions of a luncheon she attended with newly tenured associate professors:

> . . . after we had that luncheon with the associate professors—the brand-new associate professors talking about the tenure process—when we came back over here, I ran into one of them and I thanked her for doing that, that it was a helpful process, although it made me very anxious. She sort of patted me on the shoulder and said, 'From what I see, you have nothing to worry about.' But I also feel, not only from her but from some of the senior professors, this tension, like they like me and they would like to get to know me, but they're afraid to do that because they don't want to mislead me in any way or they don't want to like me too much and then in two years find I'm not here anymore. . . . So I do feel there's always this ambivalence, like 'We'd like to have you, but we're not sure we're going to get to keep you.' So I get paranoid and I get nervous, and I feel like I belong but I don't really belong, and it's a limbo that I feel like I'm living in.

On the Defensive

Across participants in this research, performance appraisal pressures in academic departments are complicated by, among other things, complex interpersonal dynamics among colleagues. Although many describe personal reactions to these dynamics, they more often describe defensive reactions of colleagues. I came to recognize the degree to which participants believe that *they* must assume a defensive stance and was struck by their reactions.

Perhaps the most commonly mentioned behavior in response to performance appraisal pressures was a preoccupation with "know-

Preoccupation with "knowing" centers around narrowing down a numeric range of refereed publications expected for tenure.

ing" and—what one participant in this study referred to as—"pinning down" from authorities both what is expected and what will hold weight in tenure proceedings. Their preoccupation with "knowing" mostly centers around narrowing down a numeric range of refereed publications expected for tenure or trying to interpret the meaning of language used in reference to publishing and fund-raising in university and departmental documents. Bob reveals his concerns:

> . . . the biggest concern I have about it is that you can't get a straight, clear answer as to what's expected of you. In other words, nobody will say six papers is enough or eight papers, or five papers and $300,000 or seven papers and $200,000 or . . .

Knowing that "everything that really counts is money and papers," Bob seeks out some sign of what combination of grant money and articles are required. His focus becomes narrowed as, "let's face it, service and teaching and everything else, that just has to meet some minimal adequate level."

In spite of his belief about what "really counts," Bob perceives the criteria for promotion and tenure as evasive. He recognizes that paper output may not be enough:

> One of the things that you'll hear from senior faculty is that what they really want to see is continuity in paper output. It's not even just the raw number of papers, but are they coming out at regular intervals. In other words, are you working steadily? So apparently all curriculum vitae with ten publications are not created equal. . . . So there are all these variables, and you don't know how to play one off against the other.

Publish, Publish, Publish

Performance appraisal pressures are perceived to directly and visibly influence participants' work lives and priorities. Across all 18 participants, the quality of one's teaching was perceived to hold little

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or no weight in the research university's reward system and most possessed a unequivocal sense of what is valued and what ultimately will be rewarded in promotion and tenure proceedings. Consider the claims of Mary followed by Bob:

> They do—and they told us this—value research above everything else. If you're a really bad teacher, they will worry about that; but if you've published a wonderful book with Cambridge or Harvard or Oxford—from what I hear—that teaching won't prevent you from getting tenure. But the other way around doesn't work. If you're a wonderful teacher but haven't published a book, you don't get tenure. So it's the research that's first. I've never heard of anybody being denied tenure because their service record wasn't good enough. Not even because their teaching record wasn't good enough. It always comes down to research. Everything else has to meet some minimum.

With the exception of three of the 18 sampled, participants admit that the direction of their research, choice of publishing outlets, and the allocation of their work time is influenced by tenure pressures. About the direction of their research, for example, one participant describes having to stay "focused and very conservative" in his research program; another describes having to "not branch out and try new things that might be exciting."

Across participants, the influence of being socialized within a profession that values certain activities over others was apparent. Mary recollects:

> I think I got into this field initially because I wanted to teach and write a couple of articles on the side. . . . When I was a doctoral candidate I realized what people had kept telling me—that it was the research that counted. We were even told as graduate students teaching classes that to work on those papers for your classes and put the teaching second, even third, because those papers would be the papers that would be formed into articles, that

Something's wrong—assistant professors should not be organizing sessions at major national or international conferences.

> would be published, that would get you the position . . . that would get you tenure—and so all the emphasis was put on that and very little was put on teaching.

As is the case with the ascendant position of scholarly research in the academic reward system, the low priority status of teaching has been inbred and instilled in many of the faculty with whom I spoke—seemingly part of their socialization into the profession.

Praise But No Praise

For those who are on the receiving end of more definitive forms of feedback, feeling forced to "read into" what is *not* being said or having to deal with contradictory messages is both a frustration and a preoccupation. Hearing that he needs to improve his service record sparks feelings of resentment in Bob:

> I'm always looking for what do I need to do now? . . . My last letter [from an annual review] that came back said, 'Well, you submitted papers—that's good. You had a couple of papers accepted—that's good. Your teaching reviews have generally been good—that's nice. In the area of service, perhaps you should organize a session at a national or international conference.' Now, there's something fundamentally wrong there. Assistant professors should not be organizing sessions at major national or international conferences.

Mary, on the other hand, has a contrasting reaction as she is once again reminded of the lingering pressure of having to transform her dissertation into a book:

> All of my evaluations have been very positive. They have praised me for both my teaching and also my service, and they've written follow-up letters that say the same thing. And they have liked the other things that I've been publishing—the articles—but they have always ended with 'Get back to that manuscript—get the book done.' So it's almost like praise but no praise. Or they take away the

You feel like you're on this hot plate. They're always going to find something. You pick this end up, something's going to slide over.

praise that they've given . . .

Recognizing the conditional nature of any positive feedback she receives, Mary accepts the feedback and moves ahead. But Mary readily admits, her dependency upon the positive regard and feedback from her colleagues:

> I think I'm way too much dependent on feedback, and some sort of outside reward. I think I need to get much more of that from inside me, and to a certain extent I have a lot of confidence in myself, but I still need that sort of paternal reassurance, to say, 'Yes, you're good,' and 'Yes, we like what you're doing,' and 'Here's a lollipop to show you that we like what you're doing.' I think I could work on that and grow up a little more in that respect, but I still do need some of the outside recognition. And to me that's partly what tenure is.

For both Mary and Bob, the formal feedback they receive admittedly has an influence on their lives. Mary comments first, followed by Bob:

> Everybody always gets a letter that points to something, so this is what they picked in my particular case. But you feel like you're on this hot plate. They're always going to find something. You pick this end up, something's going to slide over here. Finishing them up, pushing them out . . .
>
> That's coming up for me in the spring [the fourth-year review], and I'm anxious about it, obviously, because it's an evaluative process, and to a certain extent I take that personally—somebody saying to me, "Your teaching is not up to snuff," or "your publishing isn't up to par," "your service isn't up to par" . . . I try to do my best in all of those areas, and when I get criticized in them, I take it personally.

'Doing The Right Thing'

Social expectations is another area where participants speak

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There are certain things that he must do to be in good standing in his "home" department—not speaking up about divisive issues.

candidly about their feelings. I ask Mary to tell me more about what she termed the "social side of being known and accepted':

> I think it has an unconscious psychological effect on people. You're visible, and so when your name comes up before them for tenure, they remember you, they know who you are. If they like you, they may be more inclined, if it's a borderline case, to vote in your favor. . . . this is probably a fault of mine, or not necessarily a fault, but a poor decision of mine is I don't go to the parties simply because I want to do what's politically correct. . . . they [Mary's colleagues] do a lot of things because it's politically correct, have lunch with somebody different every day—I don't see where they find the time for that. But I don't want to suck up to people that I don't like, and if that's what I have to do to get tenure, then forget it.

The phrase "doing the right thing" was coined by a participant in this research who works at a research center with a split-appointment in an academic department. He noted that there are certain things he must do to be in good standing in his "home" department. This includes not "speaking up about divisive issues" at faculty meetings, where one might be taking a "chance of ticking somebody off."

A Sword Hanging Over My Head

One-third of the participants—both males and females—revealed to me ways in which work and tenure pressures impact upon their marriage and family. Bob, for example, sees tenure as something that "dominates" his thoughts and conversations both at work and at home, describing the "big impact" tenure has had on both his and his wife's life:

> If I get it [tenure], we'll probably live in [this city] for a while. If I don't, we won't. And so it's like a sword hanging over her head, as well. So, yeah, it's affected my personal life. I hope it hasn't completely skewed my personality and

The relative importance of acquiring tenure is intricately related to their ways of dealing with day-to-day pressures.

> my way of looking at the world, and I think I'm still capable of having fun. And I'd have to say I'm generally a happy person, actually, although there have been times since I've been here that I've been really concerned. And I eat more Tums than I used to—I do have an ulcer, which I didn't get here but which had pretty much subsided a long time ago and has flared up since I got here. So there's no doubt that it puts stress on you.

But it was, by far, in narratives of women faculty where the impact of the tenuring process on personal lives was most evident. For example, a female assistant professor in an applied social science described feeling tremendous guilt about being involved in a worship community, about taking time for recreation and entertaining. She revealed to me having "regressed . . . in terms of a social life; the tenure process had left her feeling "like a gerbil."

What Does Acquiring Tenure Mean?

Over the course of our conversations, I came to understand that the relative importance of acquiring tenure for participants is intricately related to their ways of dealing with day-to-day pressures. This was the area where strong gender differences surfaced.

For males in the sample, specifically those associated with "hard" sciences, their attitudes toward their jobs appear directly related to the meaning they ascribe to acquiring academic tenure. Their self-discipline comes through focusing on task, securing grants and getting the papers out, and distancing themselves from departmental dynamics and politics. Many appear to possess a strong sense of optimism and confidence that things will fall into place and meritorious rewards will naturally follow. The meaning tenure has for them appears to fall in line. Consider Bob's insights:

> You asked me about, at our first meeting, the motivation to go back to get a Ph.D. and I said, well, it sort of represented the epitome of the profession to me, and then I said being a college professor is, in some sense, the

Acquiring tenure "is an indication that I am important, I am doing a good job, and that they want me to hang around."

> epitome of the profession because they are the movers and the shakers that direct where the science goes . . . if I'm going to bother to do this, I want to be good at it, I want to do it right. Well, achieving tenure is sort of another stamp along the way. . . . I'm just sappy enough to believe it [that] this represents sort of another stamp of achievement, that it's a neat thing to be [tenured].

As females responded to my questions about what it means to them to acquire academic tenure, they, like the males, refer to notion the males mentioned such as job stability and security, increased mobility, and evidence of having proven themselves among peers. There were subtle differences between male and female responses, however. Mary's response to my question "What does acquiring tenure mean to you?" is telling:

> It [acquiring tenure] means a great deal to me, because I put a lot of stock in simply the respect that seems to come along with it. It's not so much that I can stay here forever now if I want—that doesn't mean that much to me. But it's the indication from my colleagues that I am important, and that I am doing a good job, and that they want me to hang around. So it's not so much a practical thing as it is maybe a ethical thing, or a personal thing.

The meaning of acquiring tenure here appears more personalized and its importance inflated. Mary continues:

> I think, to a certain extent, I set it [tenure] up as some sort of nirvana. This is what I'm going for, and if I don't get it, it means I've failed. . . . We live in such a success-oriented culture, and failures are frowned upon both in sports and in business, and I know in my own family, in particular, it's always been "You can do what you want to do, but you better do it well.". . . . So maybe I'm preparing them for the possibility of failing.

New faculty have to make sense of ambiguous and obscure or hidden information, gauge departmental politics, and establish credibility.

Complexities of Life on the Tenure Track

In support of much of the existing literature on the adjustments of new faculty, this research reveals a number of distinctive demands on and pressures facing junior faculty entering a tenure track appointment. The observations below are an attempt to capture some of the common themes that surface in this research. While this paper, thus far, focuses on but two of the 18 original participants, the observations below are extracted from the entirety of this research.

Knowing What to Know

This research reveals that new junior faculty are not only faced with definitive tasks, such as designing courses and writing and securing grants, but must deal with the less explicit, such as coming to understand where to go in the institution to get the support and answers they need. They have to make sense of ambiguous and oftentimes obscure or hidden information, have to gauge departmental politics and factions, and have to delicately establish their credibility among peers and senior colleagues. This is, indeed, a difficult set of obstacles for many faculty in this study.

One striking aspect of participants' insights into the interpersonal dynamics in their departments involve the preoccupation that many had with knowing where they stood in the tenure process. They describe a variety of ways colleagues attempted to "pin down" the criteria for tenure, such as getting a "list of the right journals" in which to publish.

Knowing Where You Stand

Gauging where they stand in the process, on the other hand, oftentimes involves comparative practices, such as being attuned to the composition of the fellow tenure-track colleagues, the demography of faculty across ranks in the department, or the experience of forerunners in the tenure process. These benchmarks are noted to

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Values are shaped, status differentials are reinforced, and certain individuals are placed in positions of advantage.

help gauge one's own prospects for success.

For many, particularly the females, getting caught up in making these comparisons leads to apprehension, anxiety, and sometimes fear. Lastly, for those faculty who receive regular formal evaluations, feedback provided by the department chair only propagated feelings of uncertainly and apprehension. The language used in evaluations is often scrutinized, perceived suspiciously, and open to multiple interpretations.

Distinctions among colleagues in a department—such as "the teachers" versus "the researchers"—contributes to a perception among participants that certain groups and individuals have greater access to resources and opportunities, putting them in an advantageous position in comparison to their peers.

Knowing Where You Belong

Participants' narratives reveal a highly competitive culture, where differences in status and prestige are reinforced and propagated through overt and more subtle departmental practices. For instance, being made to feel, as one participant termed, like you "belong but really don't belong" or being treated in a less-than-respectful manner in social situations was noted to send a subtle yet strong message of exclusion.

For other participants, the more overt actions of departments—such as public statements at faculty meetings or the way office space in the department is allocated—made a distinct statement as to who *is* and who *is not* valued. In the meantime, values are shaped, status differentials are reinforced, and certain individuals are placed in positions of advantage over others.

There appears to be an subtle relationship between how participants classify colleagues in their department and how they think about who *are* and *are not* their "peers." This is particularly true as it relates to how participants are being evaluated in tenure and promotion decisions. Colleagues within the department are often viewed as having formal or split allegiances, leading to

New faculty wonder whether their presence or absence at social functions will make a difference in their chances for tenure.

perceptions of “in-groups” having positions of unfair advantage over “out-groups.”

Other participants speak more ambiguously of “in-groups” and “out-groups,” suggesting much more fluctuating boundaries. Many of the faculty I interviewed, particularly the females, express feeling some sense of isolation from their colleagues. For those who saw themselves on the margins, the perceived differential advantages of colleagues appear to be only accentuated.

Who to Trust?

As illustrated in the tales of Mary and Bob, some of these faculty are left feeling confused and isolated. Underlying a number of experiences, particularly women’s, there appear to be a sense of suspicion and distrust at having listened to collegial-type rhetoric in one arena, but witnessing evidence to the contrary in another.

Attending social engagements was but one of a number of departmental expectations where participants wonder whether their presence or absence will make a difference in their chances for tenure. They reveal the unspoken code of—what one participant termed—an “expected behavior of junior faculty” that influences not only their behavior but how they perceive senior faculty might react to that behavior.

Regardless of gender, a number of participants in this study describe being cognizant of or engaging in behavior that could be viewed as political. But for some participants, most noticeably females, such behavior as—what one participant termed—“doing the right thing,” can lead to compromising personal values or violating closely-held principles.

Publish or Perish

As participants thought about the influence of tenure pressures on their academic work, activities associated with research and publishing dominated my conversations with them. Participants describe making adjustments to conform to tenure pressures and

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Faculty perceive that "quantity" of publications will be rewarded over "quality"—teaching holds little or no weight for tenure.

expectations, such as carefully planning one's research agenda to include more "conservative" projects that will reach fruition within the tenure time frame and submitting research projects for publication at a point earlier than they would otherwise.

Participants reveal taking on short-term, conservative research projects, often not central to their current research interests nor tapping into their more creative energies. Research activity is directed to tasks that they believe will be rewarded—for example, attaining grants, writing a book, publishing a steady output of "least publishable units."

A number of participants perceive that "quantity" of publications will be rewarded over "quality." Across all 18 participants, teaching is perceived to hold little or no weight in academic tenure proceedings and becomes relegated to a low priority status.

It Gets Personal

Participants identified ways that promotion and tenure pressures impinge upon their personal lives, particularly relationships and family. Tenure pressures were sometimes noted to not only be used as an excuse to bring work home, but often were a focus for placing blame when conflicts and pressures mount. As it relates to this research, I found Finkelstein's (1984) observation—that the "preemptiveness" of the academic role pervades the non-work-related aspects of faculty lives"—to be, for the most part, true.

A Gender Difference?

In analyzing the perspectives of most male participants, there appear to be traces of the values and norms of science echoing the "ethos of science" originally conceptualized by Merton (1938). Invariably, the Mertonian-like "imperatives" involve concentrating on task, "doing science," and working independently.

Males appear to associate acquiring tenure with job stability and security, increased mobility, as well as status and power within their academic department and beyond. They also view tenure as a

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For most females in this study, the recognition of tenure seems a validation of their worth and legitimacy as an academic.

symbol of having proven themselves among peers. To varying degrees, the prospect of acquiring tenure appears to stroke their ego. For many males, having proven one's abilities and achieving such status and accomplishment, rights and privileges are expected to be forthcoming.

For most males, the recognition of being granted tenure may be viewed as a symbol of reward. For most females in this study, the recognition of tenure seems a validation of their worth and legitimacy as an academic. Both sexes face similar obstacles, but the female participants appear to confront the tenure system as one of a legacy of ongoing "tests" by which they are placed in the position of having to prove something to others and themselves.

The female ego, I found, was not nearly as invested in valorizing tenure as an "award" as was the case with males. Clark and Corcoran's (1986) conclusion that women academics face "accumulative disadvantage" from the time they choose graduate school through career entry and beyond rings true to the experiences women described in this study.

Action Steps

For Academic Departments

Insights gleaned from this research have the potential to help academic administrators and senior faculty understand how mixed and often contradictory messages get communicated to junior faculty, how differential statuses get propagated and reinforced by common departmental practices, and how junior faculty experience the dynamics of academic tenure review. More specifically, implications of this research for senior faculty in academic departments—and other academic administrators—are as follows:

> *Work to raise awareness*. Participants described a variety of departmental practices that were perceived to propagate status and power differentials. Constructive change may be

Preventing isolation of junior faculty in an academic department may best begin with attention to their transition process.

first a matter of raising awareness, recognizing the inevitability of status and power differentials, and genuinely working to integrate the diverse perspectives, voices, and interests that exist among members of the department. For some departments, simply holding regular individual and departmental meetings—in which a conscientious and honest "seeking out" of the perspectives of others—appears a necessary prelude to improving communication with junior faculty.

Provide effective communication. Participants in this study were most often caught off guard by decisions that appear arbitrary or made under what were perceived to be false pretenses. When guidelines, rationales, and justifications for decisions are both developed collegially and effectively communicated in advance—in a form accessible to those individuals being affected and consistent with actions in the past—members of the organization may be more accepting of and accommodating to change. An example that came up in this research involves the allocation of discretionary funds, such as support of faculty travel to conferences and sabbatical leaves. The clearer the criteria and guidelines in this area, the fewer the chances for misunderstanding, controversy, and perceived "game playing."

Attend to newcomer socialization. Preventing isolation of junior faculty in an academic department may best begin with attention to their transition process. This should begin with a thorough and constructive evaluation of existing departmental and university-wide socialization practices—for example, new faculty orientation and tenure and promotion mentoring. To smooth transitions, departments can make special efforts to acknowledge the extra time required of a new teacher for certain tasks—for example, developing a new course—as well as consider reductions in teaching, advising, and committee work. There's also the need to help faculty become more aware of support networks, both professional and personal. Informa-

Sincerity of gentures of support are easily discerned by junior faculty, particularly as judgments are made as to who one can trust.

tion that is likely to appear ambiguous, contradictory, and anxiety producing—like criteria for promotion and tenure—might be addressed at an appropriate time and place during the orientation. If the stated criteria are intentionally designed to be imprecise, communicating a rationale may help to ease or negate potential misunderstandings. Consistency in form and content of the information appears critical, as well as sharing the information in a systematic rather than haphazard manner.

Attempt to provide support. Much emotional, social, and work support appears to come from individual initiatives, such as when senior faculty members go out of their way to explain the ins and outs of surviving at that particular institution. As this research shows, however, too often gestures made early on are not perceived as genuine. The sincerity of gestures of support are easily discerned by junior faculty, particular as judgments are made as to who one can and cannot trust. Department chairs can set an example by fostering in colleagues both the interest and commitment to mentoring junior faculty.

For Junior Faculty

A number of recommendations for managing and dealing with the press of tenure came out during this study. A few suggestions shared by participants or gleaned during the analysis are mentioned below:

Clarify the initial contract. The results of this study suggest that newcomers may want to take certain precautions, such as to (a) note the length of the probationary period and the degree to which contract flexibility can be negotiated—for example, taking leave for child-rearing activities, (b) clarify rules regarding credit towards tenure and fully understand the implications of taking such credit, and (c) make explicit the nature of contractual relationships between departments when one has a split appointment. The importance of retaining all

Newcomers may be better off coming into a tenure-track appointment expecting to encounter contradictions in language.

paperwork, particularly letters of appointment, policies regarding promotion and tenure in faculty and departmental handbooks, and other personnel policies, is self-evident. Often references to specific requirements, criteria, policies, and procedures on promotion and tenure are couched in obscure and ambiguous language or not addressed at all. One might compensate for this by carefully following up verbal agreements with the department chair with a letter that summarizes the conversation, using language that clarifies expectations for the newcomer. This practice appears particularly important in cases where the junior faculty member experiences a succession in departmental leadership or a change in the university administration. This may, however, be perceived as threatening to a department chair or senior faculty evaluator and must be initiated with caution. Newcomers may be better off coming into a tenure-track appointment expecting to encounter contradictions in language. Separating oneself from the informal, behind-the-scenes “gossip” about such notions as the “magic number” of publications, and to know when and how to broach such topics in more formal settings—such as an annual review—appeared to be an important factor in many participants’ attempts to manage their affairs.

Address the constraints of the tenure timetable. Much of the frustration junior faculty experience appears to have to do with the timetable of the tenure process. The constraints of the traditional seven-year period have been suggested to have a compromising influence on the research and publishing practices of participants as well as on the perceived devaluing of teaching and undergraduate education. Despite that fact that junior faculty may be aware of cases of flexibility in the timetable among forerunners, the messages they receive from departmental leadership convey rigidity. A number of relevant questions might be asked by the junior faculty member: Is there any flexibility in the timetable and any precedents for

The best advice to new faculty—be slow to take sides on issues until you know what all the sides are and what the real agenda is.

either abbreviated or elongated processes? Why should all junior faculty—particularly from different disciplines—be held accountable within a standard time frame? What will be the effect of the timetable on the nature of my scholarly work?

Understand interpersonal dynamics within the department. Perhaps the most sound advice suggested by this study is to accept that factions and lines of demarcation among faculty are inevitable and resist participating in their propagation. Who an individual entrusts is a sensitive and personal matter, one that appears to have been most successfully handled by participants in this study who exhibited caution and took time to carefully establish relationships. The best advice may come from faculty development specialists (Thompson and Boice, 1988) who advise faculty to "be slow to take sides on issues until you know what all the sides are and what the 'real agenda' is." Early on in the appointment appears a particularly important time for a newcomer to be prudent in associations and allegiances. Interpersonally delicate and politically sensitive situations must be approached with extreme caution. Facing the inevitability of having to survive in an environment infused with politics and status differentials, the ability of junior faculty members to represent their own interests—in a manner that is appropriately timed, consistent, has minimal chances of backfiring, and maintains their integrity—is critical.

Try to separate yourself from the competitive or defensive reactions of others. Regardless of how much departmental rhetoric refers to evaluation "on the basis of individual merit" or "the supportive atmosphere in the department," insights from this research suggests that contradictory messages from different sources will be encountered, leading to feelings of suspicion and distrust for the junior faculty member. Newcomers should anticipate entering a competitive environment—in both complex and subtle ways—and develop in advance a

strategy for how they are going to deal with it. Trust the quality of your own scholarship and teaching. Survival, as evidenced by the participants in this study, appears linked to sound judgment and self-confidence. Those who appear the most well adjusted are those who have come to the point of trusting their instincts, their integrity as a scholar, teacher, and academic, and of knowing when, how much, and who else to trust. Examining how and who one trusts becomes essential.

Manage the demands of professional and personal spheres. Many participants in this study struggle with reconciling the demands of work and personal life. For most, gains in professional life result in perceived losses in personal life. The experience of participants in this research reinforce the insights of faculty development specialists, such as Sorcinelli and Gregory (1987), who suggest that "no personal coping strategy—or set of strategies—will be adequate in themselves to solve the problems as they now exist." They recommend a number of personal strategies for coping with stress, including improved communication, developing better means of organization, seeking support, and maintaining flexibility.

In closing, insights gleaned from this research can contribute to the ongoing discussion of the academic reward system and how scholarship within the academy is defined (for example, Boyer, 1990). This is a discussion that has been initiated and accelerated over the past few years, as presidents and provosts across the country have been charging task forces and committees to reexamine various aspects of the faculty reward system.

Rather than becoming preoccupied with clarifying procedural aspects of the promotion and tenure process, the time may be right to critically evaluate and redefine the criteria associated with and the purposes of tenure.

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