

A Case for Revisiting Tenure Requirements

by Dianne Rush Woods

Most colleges and universities have a tripartite mission composed of teaching, research, and service. For faculty seeking tenure, though, this mission can seem very heavily weighted toward research. In fact, the phrase “publish or perish” is widely understood both inside and outside the academy as the primary path to a successful career in higher education. Over the years, various scholars have wondered whether this intense focus on research—to the detriment of both teaching and service—is in the best interests of junior faculty, the institution, or the students. In fact, current tenure requirements emphasizing research may work against institutional goals. “If the profession does not act now [to change tenure policies],” write Cathy A. Trower and Richard P. Chait, senior research associate and director, respectively, of the Project on Faculty Appointments at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, “faculty diversity may be stalled for another 30 years—which would not serve the interests of the academy *or* society at large.” Wouldn’t a broader scope of requirements for tenure be an improvement for all involved?

In the pages that follow, I hope to provide a picture of what it is like to be an African-American female on the tenure track attempting to juggle the many challenges of university life with personal, professional, and community responsibilities. This is not a cry for sympathy, but a challenge to expand our narrow cultural understanding of requirements for tenure and success, and to incorporate the

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different experiences and insights of women and people of color. After examining the current philosophy guiding tenure policy and the attendant climate, I close with some suggestions for institutions and for junior faculty. Because this is a personal narrative, I'll first tell you something about my background.

Academic environments have always felt like home to me, and education was strongly encouraged in my family. My mother, a sharecropper's daughter who was unable to complete high school during her youth, supported my love of education and love of school. She allowed me to spend long summer days at the main library in Oakland, California, reading everything that I could get my hands on. During

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my adolescence, she returned to school and we graduated from high school the same year.

After high school, I received a bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley and a master of social work (MSW) degree from University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). I then worked as a therapist, clinician, and manager, specializing in hospital-based programs, employee assistance work, and managed care. I eventually became director of two national provider relations networks but began to feel the need to do something more. After a 20-year absence, I returned to Berkeley to complete a Ph.D. in social welfare and a master's degree in public health. A long-time resident of the Bay Area, I live in Emeryville with my two sons and an extended family.

Currently, I am a tenure-track professor and have taught at California State University, East Bay (formerly California State University, Hayward) for five years. In 2003, I helped develop a social work program at the university and was one of the two original faculty members in this new endeavor. The program features two models leading to an MSW: a standard, three-quarter model and a year-round model with summer block placement.

As a faculty member of color, I believe I have a special obligation to reach out to other people of color and the communities where they live. My commitment is rooted in two principles from Kwanzaa, the African-American celebration of community, and is informed by an Afrocentric worldview that is sometimes at odds with the Eurocentric model most often found in American higher education. The two Kwanzaa principles I refer to are Umoja and Ujima. Umoja (unity) means "to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race (reaching out to our community to make sure that we offer opportunities to individuals

within these communities),” while Ujima (collective work and responsibility) means “to build and maintain our community together and make our brothers’ and sisters’ problems our problems and to solve them together.” My university’s mission, values, and objectives suggest that our academic community believes in the principle of Ujima. My Afrocentric worldview embraces these principles and expands on them to include the need not only to connect to the African-American community but to reach out to all disenfranchised and oppressed people in my role as a university professor. I believe this type of outreach should be an important part of the tenure process.

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Most of those dominating the political, economic, and social systems of the university buy into a traditional, Eurocentric view of achievement within the academy, which supports scientific and technological achievements above all else. Afrocentricity, by contrast, is an empowering counter-hegemonic philosophy that attempts to critique, challenge, and eventually shift the way knowledge is pursued from models created within a European cultural construct to one centered within an African-American cultural construct.¹ This approach encourages the university to embrace a less linear, more global view—one that includes outreach activities and work in the community.

A Eurocentric view does not intentionally dismiss outreach to the community as unimportant. However, this view believes that the European tradition of achievement is central and most important to the university’s social values and cultural heritage. Afrocentric approaches are more global and inclusive, and issues such as bringing along others (Ujima) are central to this perspective. Although the academy gives lip service to the need for multiculturalism, the European-American tradition holds sway. Alternative views, such as Afrocentricity, are ignored or marginalized by academic power structures.

Ironically, an Afrocentric outlook is aligned very closely with what society expects from institutions of higher learning. Notes Helen Astin, professor of education at UCLA and the author of *Race and Ethnicity in the American Professoreiate*:

It is disheartening that higher education has not done a better job in recruiting and sustaining a more diverse group of people for its faculty ranks, especially when faculty of color have shown greater commitment to what the public says it wants from its colleges: more attention to undergraduate education and greater service to the community. It appears that faculty of color are consistently more like-

ly than white faculty to be motivated in their careers by the opportunity to influence social values and social change. These values are manifested in the faculty's commitment to community service and in their goals for undergraduates.

I believe I have a special obligation to work with other people of color and the communities where they live. My university and other universities do this, but we can do it better. Our universities need to reach out to K–12 schools that service minority populations with greater consistency. We need to recognize that the university is often a cold and alienating environment that can cause disappointment and despair for young people of color, so we must have appropriate support systems in place to mitigate against this alienation. CSU, East Bay—and, I'm sure, most other higher education institutions—declares that it supports diversity, multiculturalism, and service to all communities, including minority communities. One concrete way to move these abstractions to concrete practice is to connect them to the tenure and promotion process.

Certainly, as things stand, promotion, tenure, and retention are driven by research and publications (and, increasingly, bringing in external funding). While universities consider teaching, service on departmental, school, and university committees, and service in the community important, a faculty member on the tenure track will not be tenured without a significant research and publication record. Promotion and tenure committees will give pats on the head for community service but, for the most part, this service is not considered significant when it comes to tenure. This means that there is little incentive to do actual outreach and service. If we want to change this and encourage faculty of color, especially junior faculty, to engage in meaningful service, these faculty members need to be assured that such efforts will be valued by the university and counted significant-



ly in the promotion and tenure process. Such recognition will provide greater incentive for all faculty to take the academy's service requirement seriously. Additionally, it will make the university a more multiculturally sensitive place, increasing the possibility of attracting and retaining minority students and faculty of color.

It is clear that, despite significant progress, our universities are not fully realizing their commitment to diversity. This seems to be especially true in the case of African-American women. Singh, Robinson, and Green contend that African-American women faculty are far more disadvantaged at universities than European-

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American women and male faculty of color. Specifically, African-American female faculty members are promoted and tenured at a lower rate than either African-American men or European-American women.²

To counter this hostile environment and perform adequately in academe, women and minority faculty have developed certain coping skills. Malveaus notes that African-American faculty members must be master jugglers: They become all things to all people and juggle expectations, identities, and responsibilities in communities that gave only little tolerance for people who drop the ball. She asks that administrations look at this juggling as a retention issue that needs to be explored by African-American faculty, university administration, and the colleagues of African-American faculty who add to the burden of these master jugglers.³

For women, who most often shoulder domestic and child-rearing tasks, the ever-present need to multitask is especially dramatic. "I am constantly struggling against the perception that I'm not doing enough," says Patricia Moran, a tenure-track faculty member at the University of California, Davis and mother of two young children. "I'm madly juggling in a way that a lot of men can't even imagine."⁴ As a mother and a faculty member, I understand completely.

A typical day in a junior faculty member's life usually sends her scrambling in multiple directions: There are the "requests" from the department chair, veiled "demands" from senior faculty, the need to serve on college and university committees, pleas for time from desperate students, "opportunities" for faculty development, and in-service training to take advantage of the latest technologies. Everything takes time. Writing, preparing for class, completing human subjects documents, applying for grants, faculty meetings, taking that minute (that stretch-

es to 30) to give the shaken student mentoring, encouragement, or correction. Most often, I feel that there is not enough time in the day to complete all that I'm required to do.

I have peers who pull out of the system almost completely, minimally engaging in department and student life, because they jealously guard every minute and work on their research and publication to the level of selfishness. The juggling act that I perform requires that I constantly make choices—choices made with an eye toward achieving tenure while, at the same time, not drifting away from my values as a mother and African-American community member.

Probationary periods should either be eliminated or tailored to the candidate's circumstances and discipline, and adaptable to family responsibilities.

To improve the climate in higher education for women and faculty of color, I have several suggestions. As part of the mission, universities should make a commitment to provide an academically rich, multicultural learning experience that prepares all its students to realize their goals, pursue meaningful life work, and to be socially responsible contributors to their communities, locally and globally. With respect to values, we should emphasize learning in an academic environment that is inclusive, student-centered, and aware of the world it is part of. Faculty should be encouraged to value engagement in the civic, cultural, and economic life of the communities we serve locally and regionally. We should strive to provide a stimulating university climate that is welcoming, diverse, and inclusive, and fosters multicultural learning experiences. We should endeavor to recruit and retain diverse high-quality faculty, staff, and students. And we would do well to incorporate the concept of outreach and community service through a new slogan: "Service or Perish." Many of these ideas are already in place, but we must now do a better job of putting these concepts into action and connecting them to ways junior faculty can achieve tenure.

Chait, in *The Questions of Tenure*, suggests the following seven revisions to tenure policy. First, the candidate's dossier, as well as the portfolio of peers, should be open to inspection by the candidate. Second, promotion and tenure committees should reflect a commitment to diversity. Third, the scholarship of discovery—conventional research—should not outweigh the scholarship of teaching and service. Fourth, collaborative research should be valued as much as independent research. Fifth, interdisciplinary research should be prized as much as disciplinary research. Sixth, probationary periods should either be eliminated or tailored to the candidate's circumstances and discipline, and adaptable to family responsibilities. Seventh, tenure-track faculty should be provided clear expectations, unambiguous

standards, and consistent counsel. “These operational changes are motivated by deeper suppositions—sometimes explicit, sometimes tacit—which challenge, or at the very least complicate, the ‘assumptive world’ of orthodox tenure,” he writes. “The differences are not about right or wrong, or necessarily even about males and females, or minority and majority.”⁵ These changes are very much about changing policies to reflect changing realities and to better fulfill institutional missions.

Over the last few years, I have developed a strategy for navigating my way through the university and the tenure process. I believe some of what I have

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learned may be of value to other junior faculty, especially junior faculty of color.

First, I commit one day each week to do my research and writing. I also set aside a weekend day that is only for my sons and my extended family. I have shared my reasoning with the department chair and he has become my ally and mentor in keeping my writing on track, as well as asking others to step up in the department and take on administrative responsibilities. Other techniques that I believe are important for tenure-track faculty include:

Assessment—Have someone in your department or school assess the viability of your position and mentor you on those things that need to be done to ensure your successful completion of tenure. Ask this mentor to be honest with you about your strengths and challenges and to help you make the necessary adjustments. Ask for this type of assessment at least annually.

Committee Work—Don’t serve on just any committee. Choose your committees judiciously. Select those that give you a high profile and that will connect you with potential mentors.

Assertiveness Skills—Learning how to say “no” without offending others is an art. Make sure that you assert your need to have time to juggle your work, personal life, and other valued activities.

Refocus/Reprioritize—Regularly take time to look at exactly what it is you want to accomplish in your professional life. Far too often, we are driven by the needs of the department at the expense of our own research, teaching, and other needs.


Cloister Yourself—Enter your office and close the door. Establish an atmosphere of sacred time that cannot be interrupted by others and that is reserved for your work.

Departmental Work—List all the work that you are doing departmentally.

Identify the work that truly supports the goals of the department and moves it forward. Assert yourself when too much is assigned to you.

Umoja Work—Focus on a small but significant outreach activity. For someone in social work like me, this might include work with a local school district or work with a Head Start program.

Ujima Work—Become involved in active student mentoring on campus. Make sure that the sterile and (often perceived as) hostile environment of the campus does not frighten away students from disenfranchised and disempowered communities.

Despite the demands of tenure and family, I have managed to work on a small outreach project—working with an urban high school that counts as service and allows me to give back to my community—that was not only successful for students, but soul-satisfying for me. This type of activity allows me to continue doing my work, because I am doing good (for the people) while doing well (in the tenure process). While there are many great joys to being a professor in the university, these joys do not come without pitfalls. In my ideal world, my research interests and the requirements for tenure would coincide with my joys (teaching, outreach, community service). Certainly, at both the individual and institutional levels, there are many lessons to learn. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Lee Baker, *Afrocentric Racism*, 1991.
- ² Singh, Robinson, and Williams–Green, *Differences in Perceptions of African American Women and Men Faculty and Administrators*, 1995.
- ³ Julliane Malveaus, *Retaining Master Jugglers*, 1998.
- ⁴ Robin Wilson, *For Women with Tenure and Families, Moving Up the Ranks is Challenging*, 2001.
- ⁵ Richard P Chait, *The Questions of Tenure*, 2006.

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