

What Happens When the Dean Says, 'No'?

By Robert E. Emerick

In recent years, reappointment, tenure, and promotion decisions have become increasingly problematic and contentious.¹

My own service on a number of department- and college-level "reappointment-tenure-promotion" committees has made me increasingly cynical about these putative "democratic" decision-making processes. I began to believe that faculty time and effort on such committees was actually "busy work," since it seemed to me that whenever a college dean said "no" to a request for tenure or promotion, it became a *fait accompli*, despite positive recommendations from numerous faculty committees.

I began to believe that procedures that supposedly include faculty members as equal decision-making partners are actually heavily dominated by administrators who have stronger cost-saving and empire-building motives than motives related to making things better for faculty or students.

I decided to obtain and analyze recent reappointment-tenure-promotion (RTP) data from my university, for the years 1992-1997, in order to evaluate my own cynicism about the academic decision-making process. This paper presents the results of that analysis.

Reappointment-tenure-promotion (RTP) decisions at my institution, San Diego State University, are ostensibly based on reviews of the materials submitted by each candidate. These reviews take place at five different levels of the university.

Recommendations from each level are then submitted to the university president who makes the sixth and final decision. And all decisions are open to review through various grievance and arbitration processes at each of the six levels.

The levels of decision making include a department committee, the department chairperson, a college committee, the dean of the

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college, a university-wide faculty committee, and finally the university president.

Notice that the hierarchy of decision making alternates between committees comprised of members of the faculty at levels one, three, and five and individual administrators at levels two, four, and six.

Table 1 shows that, in the five year period from 1992-1997, 388 candidates submitted RTP applications leading to 2,328 separate recommendations from the six levels of decisions makers.

Most applications are for promotion, with or without tenure,

(228 or 58.8 percent), a significant number request reappointment (153 or 39.4 percent), and a relatively small number of people request tenure only (7 or 1.8 percent).

This is because many of the candidates who request promotion seek tenure at the same time, so these cases are classified as "promotion."

Table 1 shows that, of the 388 RTP candidates, more than three-fourths (306 or 78.9 percent) received a positive disposition to their requests. Overall, about three-fourths of RTP cases are considered "slam dunks" by the

TABLE 1

**SDSU Reappointment-Tenure-Promotion Decisions, 1992-1997
by Level of Decision Makers
(388 cases)**

Decision Making Level	Re-appoint	Terminal Year	Tenure (Only)	Promote (with and without Tenure)	No (Tenure/Promote)	No Rec. (No Decision)	NA	Total
1. DeptComm <i>(percent)</i>	143 (36.86)	3 (0.77)	4 (1.03)	172 (44.33)	40 (10.31)	5 (1.29)	21 (5.41)	388 (100)
2. DeptChar <i>(percent)</i>	131 (33.76)	5 (1.29)	5 (1.29)	142 (36.60)	29 (7.47)	7 (1.80)	69 (17.78)	388 (100)
3. CollComm <i>(percent)</i>	154 (39.69)	5 (1.29)	5 (1.29)	172 (44.33)	47 (12.11)	4 (1.03)	1 (0.26)	388 (100)
4. Dean <i>(percent)</i>	153 (39.43)	6 (1.55)	5 (1.29)	161 (41.49)	58 (14.95)	5 (1.29)	0 (0.00)	388 (100)
5. Univcomm <i>(percent)</i>	3 (0.77)	9 (2.32)	5 (1.29)	128 (32.99)	71 (18.30)	10 (2.58)	162 (41.75)	388 (100)
6. Final (Pres) <i>(percent)</i>	151 (38.92)	8 (2.06)	5 (1.29)	150 (38.66)	66 (17.01)	8 (2.06)	0 (0.00)	388 (100)
TOTAL <i>(percent)</i>	735 (31.57)	36 (1.55)	29 (1.25)	925 (39.73)	311 (13.36)	39 (1.68)	253 (10.87)	2,328 (100)
Candidate Requests	153		7	228				388
Success Rate <i>(percent)</i>	151/153= 98.69		5/7= 71.43	150/228= 65.79				306/388= 78.86

Promotion represents the most expensive personnel decision for the university.

decision makers, while the other one-fourth of the cases are considered to be “problem cases.”

As discussed below (see Tables 4 and 5), it is the problem cases that reveal the patterns of power in RTP decisions.

Nearly all candidates who request reappointment receive a positive disposition (151 out of 153 or 98.7 percent). Reappointment is the least expensive personnel decision in that it does not increase the university's costs. Accordingly, as seen in Table 1, reappointment requests are highly supported at all levels of decision making, except by the university committee, which is basically not formally engaged in the reappointment process.

Tenure decisions have a more significant impact on the university budget because they commit the university system to a long-term financial investment. It should not be surprising, as a result, that tenure decisions are more difficult and less often supported than reappointment decisions. Table 1 shows that tenure requests are supported 71.4 percent of the time, versus 98.7 percent for reappointment.

Promotion represents the most expensive personnel decision for the university since it shifts the faculty member into a new and higher salary bracket that affects all future increases. As is shown in Table 1, promotion decisions are

the least often supported among personnel decisions, at 65.8 percent. Table 1 also shows, as would be expected, that faculty committees are generally more supportive of promotion requests than are administrators.

Negative RTP decisions are shown in Table 1 in the “Terminal Year,” “No,” and “No recommendation” columns. About 2 percent of RTP decisions fall in the “terminal year” category. These represent negative reappointment decisions.

By contrast, approximately 15 percent of RTP decisions fall into the “no” or “no recommendation” categories. These categories represent negative responses to the more problematic tenure and promotion requests.

“No” decisions reflect active rejections of candidates' requests, while “no recommendation” decisions reflect cases where candidates drop out of the RTP process, so decision-makers at higher levels make no recommendation relative to the case.

Table 1 allows a comparison of the degree of support for RTP requests at the six different decision-making levels. As expected, there is less variation in support in the least problematic case of reappointment than in the most problematic case of promotion—less than 6 percent variance versus more than 11 percent variance.

RTP decisions are dominated by upper-level administrators rather than local faculty.

The greatest differences between the decision makers are in the variation of the proportion of “no” decisions. Clearly, it is less likely for those closest to the candidate (within the departments) to vote against RTP requests than it is for those most distant from the candidate (university committees and the president).

Department chairs show only 7.5 percent “no” votes, followed by 10.3 percent for department committees. University committees show 18.3 percent of their RTP decisions as “no” votes, and the university president shows 17 percent “no” votes. Overall, the “no” votes account for 311 of the 2,328 RTP decisions, or 13.4 percent. These problematic, “no” cases will be discussed in more detail below.

Tables 2 and 3 show, respectively, the influence of college and year on RTP decisions.

Table 2 shows that these differences between the nine different colleges within the university are small and not statistically significant. One might expect that RTP decisions are handled differently in the College of Sciences than in the College of Education or the College of Arts and Letters. Instead, as later analysis shows, RTP decisions are dominated by upper-level administrators rather than local faculty.

If the local faculty within

departments and colleges were, in fact, the more influential decision makers, we would expect to see significant variation between the colleges. The absence of such variance tends to support the claim that administrators are largely running the RTP show.

There are obvious variations between the colleges in terms of numbers of candidates who received reappointment and promotion decisions. But the most interesting variations appear in the “no” column. While “no” decisions account for about 17 percent of the RTP cases overall, College I received only 5 percent “no” decisions (accounted for by one applicant), while College D received a whopping 37.5 percent “no” decisions.

Such differences may be accounted for by differences in the RTP criteria used by different college deans, despite university-wide specification of standards. Differences may also reflect political biases and political favoritism toward certain colleges on the part of the final arbitrator of RTP decisions, the university president.

Table 3 separates the 388 RTP cases by year, and here we see more significant differences than were seen in terms of colleges. Clearly the campus crisis of 1992-93 had a dampening affect on the RTP process at SDSU.² 1992-93 accounted for 112 RTP candidates.

TABLE 2
SDSU Reappointment-Tenure-Promotion Decisions, 1992-1997
by College
 (388 cases)

College	Reappoint	Terminal Year	Tenure (Only)	Promote (with and without Tenure)	No (Tenure/Promote)	No Rec. (No Decision)	Total
College A	23	1	1	36	19	0	80
<i>(percent)</i>	(28.75)	(1.25)	(1.25)	(45.00)	(23.75)	(0.00)	(100)
College B	10	3		14	8	0	35
<i>(percent)</i>	(28.57)	(8.57)	(0.00)	(40.00)	(22.86)	(0.00)	(100)
College C	16	1		18	4	2	41
<i>(percent)</i>	(39.02)	(2.44)	(0.00)	(43.90)	(9.76)	(4.88)	(100)
College D	7			3	6	0	16
<i>(percent)</i>	(43.75)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(18.75)	(37.50)	(0.00)	(100)
College E	16		1	17	2	1	37
<i>(percent)</i>	(43.24)	(0.00)	(2.70)	(45.95)	(5.41)	(2.70)	(100)
College F	15		1	5	4	0	25
<i>(percent)</i>	(60.00)	(0.00)	(4.00)	(20.00)	(16.00)	(0.00)	(100)
College G	22	2		25	16	2	67
<i>(percent)</i>	(32.84)	(2.99)	(0.00)	(37.31)	(23.88)	(2.99)	(100)
College H	32	1	2	23	6	3	67
<i>(percent)</i>	(47.76)	(1.49)	(2.99)	(34.33)	(8.96)	(4.48)	(100)
College I	10			9	1		20
<i>(percent)</i>	(50.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(45.00)	(5.00)	(0.00)	(100)
TOTAL	151	8	5	150	66	8	388
<i>(percent)</i>	(38.92)	(2.06)	(1.29)	(38.66)	(17.01)	(2.06)	(100)

Pearson's chi square = 70.91763 df = 64 significance = .25812
 Cramer's V = .15115

This number went down to 89 in 1993-94, the year after the crisis, and dropped to 57 by 1996-97.

Reappointment decisions remained fairly robust during the five-year period, actually going up substantially in 1996-97. Meanwhile, the more problematic—and costly—tenure decisions went down dramatically, from 3.6 percent in 1992-93, through three years of no tenure decisions, to 1.2 percent (one candidate) in 1996-97.

Interestingly, promotion decisions went up slightly in the middle

years (from 39.3 percent to 40.5 percent, 44.4 percent, and 43.3 percent) and dropped to a low of 22.8 percent in 1996-97.

The differences by year in Table 3 are statistically significant, although relatively small in size. These difference show the negative impact of campus upheaval on the RTP process.

Faculty members who get involved in the RTP decision-making process often characterize as “slam dunks” cases where there is absolutely no doubt in anyone’s

TABLE 3

**SDSU Reappointment-Tenure-Promotion Decisions, 1992-1997
by Year
(388 cases)**

Year	Reappoint	Terminal Year	Tenure (Only)	Promote (with and without Tenure)	No (Tenure/ Promote)	No Rec. (No Decision)	Total
1992-93	43	3	4	44	18	0	112
<i>(percent)</i>	(38.39)	(2.68)	(3.57)	(39.29)	(16.07)	(0.00)	(100)
1993-94	31	4	0	36	18	0	89
<i>(percent)</i>	(34.83)	(4.49)	(0.00)	(40.45)	(20.22)	(0.00)	(100)
1994-95	25	0	0	28	10	0	63
<i>(percent)</i>	(39.68)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(44.44)	(15.87)	(0.00)	(100)
1995-96	21	0	0	29	13	4	67
<i>(percent)</i>	(31.34)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(43.28)	(19.40)	(5.97)	(100)
1996-97	31	1	1	13	7	4	57
<i>(percent)</i>	(54.39)	(1.75)	(1.75)	(22.81)	(12.28)	(7.02)	(100)
TOTAL	151	8	5	150	66	8	388
<i>(percent)</i>	(38.92)	(2.06)	(1.29)	(38.66)	(17.01)	(2.06)	(100)

Pearson's chi square = 86.24822 df = 32 significance = .00000

Cramer's V = .23574

mind that the candidate deserves the reappointment, tenure, or promotion requested.

Table 4 shows that about three-fourths of the 388 RTP candidates (285 or 73.5 percent) fall into this category of slam dunks. These are the applicants who are obviously well-prepared and well-advised ahead of time about the RTP process. The "slam dunks" received no "no" decisions from anyone.

Table 4 also shows that more than one-fourth of the RTP applicants (103 or 26.6 percent) are "problem cases." These are cases where one or more of the decision makers questioned the qualifications of the candidate for the requested advancement. That is, someone said "no."

Since everyone agrees on the

slam dunks, there is no need to exert power. But, in the problem cases, often "push comes to shove"—debates—sometimes heated, sometimes civil—take place, compromises are made—and, in general, power and its consequences become glaringly evident.

Table 4 shows, as expected, a very strong and significant correlation between final RTP outcome and whether a case falls into the slam dunk or the problem case category. Nearly all of the "slam dunks" resulted in reappointment, tenure, or promotion (282 out of 285, or 98.9 percent).

By contrast, when someone says "no," at any of the six levels of decision making, the consequence is likely to be devastating to the candidate. In fact, 79 of the 103

problem cases (76.7 percent) resulted in denial of the requested RTP advancement. Interestingly, 23 of the problem cases were eventually promoted and one was reappointed, meaning that 23.3 percent of the problem cases managed to “squeak through,” despite a negative vote somewhere along the way.

In Table 4, we see that most of the problem cases involve questions about the granting of promotions. Of the 150 candidates who were eventually promoted, 23 (or 15.3 percent) were problem cases. Another 66 candidates, in the “no” column, were so seriously problematic that they were denied promotion (and tenure, in two cases).

The “Terminal Year” column includes eight cases where requests for reappointment were denied.

In Table 5, the 103 “problem cases” are analyzed in terms of the 311 “no” votes that their cases generated over the five-year period

under analysis.

The question: Which of the decision makers—other than the university president, who has the final vote in these matters—appears to wield the greatest influence on the final outcome of the RTP process?

Table 5 compares the number of “no” votes registered at each decision-making level with the number of “no” votes in the final outcome, the “no” votes registered by the university president.

For example, department RTP committees registered 40 “no” votes, and these resulted in 25 “no” votes in the final outcome—the president’s final decisions.

“No” votes at this first level, in other words, were 62.5 percent effective in bringing about “no” votes in the final outcome. I call this the “power factor” and compare these factors for the various levels of decision makers.

Once again, in Table 5 the deci-

TABLE 4
SDSU Reappointment-Tenure-Promotion Decisions, 1992-1997
by Slam Dunks and Problem Cases
 (388 cases)

Cases	Reappoint	Terminal Year	Tenure (Only)	Promote (with and without Tenure)	No (Tenure/Promote)	No Rec. (No Decision)	Total
Slam Dunks	150	0	5	127	0	3	285
	<i>(percent)</i> (99.34)	(0.00)	(100)	(84.67)	(0.00)	(37.50)	(73.45)
Problem Cases	1	8	0	23	66	5	103
	<i>(percent)</i> (0.66)	(100)	(0.00)	(15.33)	(100)	(62.50)	(26.55)
TOTAL (Presidents disposition)	151	8	5	150	66	8	388
	<i>(percent)</i> (100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)
Candidate Requests	153		7	228			388
Success Rate	151/153=		5/7=	150/228=			306/388=
	<i>(percent)</i> 98.69		71.43	65.79			78.86

TABLE 5

**The Power of Saying “No”
SDSU Reappointment-Tenure-Promotion Decisions, 1992-1997**
(388 cases)

Decision Making Level	“No” votes at this Level	resulted in	Final “No” votes	Power Factor	(Overall Influence)
1. DeptComm <i>(percent)</i>	40 (12.86)		25 (9.43)	62.50%	
2. DeptChar <i>(percent)</i>	29 (9.32)		21 (7.92)	72.41%	
3. CollComm <i>(percent)</i>	47 (15.11)		39 (14.72)	82.98%	
4. Dean <i>(percent)</i>	58 (18.65)		54 (20.38)	93.10%	
5. Univcomm <i>(percent)</i>	71 (22.83)		60 (22.64)	84.51%	
6. Final (Pres) <i>(percent)</i>	66 (21.22)		66 (24.91)	100.00%	
TOTAL <i>(percent)</i>	311 (100)		265 (100)		

sion makers are presented hierarchically, from what one would assume is the weakest level (department committees), through the department chair, the college committee and college dean, to the university committee, and, finally, the university president.

If this common sense hierarchy is valid, we would expect to see the power factor rise in a straight line from the lowest level one to level six. Table 5 shows that this is generally true, and that the differences between the levels are significant.

The power factor at level one, department committees, is 62.5 percent and rises by about 10 percent for each of the successive levels. Department chairs show a power factor of 72.4 percent, college committees are more powerful, at 82.9 percent, and deans shows very high levels of power, at 93.1 percent.

Interestingly, we see a drop in the power factor for university committees (84.5 percent), but this demonstrates, as we suspected, that college deans are more powerful than the faculty-constituted university committees. The power factor increases as we go up the power hierarchy and peaks at the level of college dean. What this means is that when the dean says “no” in RTP proceedings, it is “no” more than 93 percent of the time!

As I suspected, administrators—specifically college deans—have more effective control over the RTP process than any other campus decision maker, save the university president.

Chairs of departments are “quasi-administrators,” but their relatively low power factor of 72.4 percent clearly reflects a connection closer to the faculty in their

RTP decisions made by a committee of faculty members from numerous disciplines may be the wisest.

departments than to the values and interests of the more disconnected “true administrators,” like college deans.

The power of deans to override faculty decisions is especially problematic when one realizes that college deans, who have usually risen from the ranks of the faculty, are academic experts in only one academic discipline, at best.

By contrast, the last RTP college committee I served on was composed of 18 different faculty members from 18 different academic disciplines.

One might make the argument, as I do, that a disciplinarily composite faculty committee should carry more weight in RTP decisions than a single individual acting in the role of dean. It seems to me, in fact, that college deans, at most, should be granted one vote on the college-wide RTP committee, rather than a separate and overriding individual vote.

There is simply no reason to believe that deans are wiser in their RTP decisions than a composite committee of faculty members from numerous disciplines. In fact, the opposite is more likely the case.

As Lawler³ has argued:

... the faculty—either in departmental units or as a whole—has the unique competence to decide on questions

involving specific academic judgements. The professors, after all, are the academic professionals. ... So *tenure decisions* [as well as reappointment and promotion decisions] *should be (and usually are) made by the departments.*⁴

My analysis shows that, at least in the case of SDSU, this is not the way it happens. Why? Lawler suggests that when the multiversity is not clearly committed to a set of ideals,

... the administrators sit atop an impressive array of intellectual forces without a clearly defined purpose. What do they do with these forces? Well, of course, *it depends on the character of the administrators ... administrators exercise their power by default.*⁵

Lawler concludes that administrators are not well-suited to making scholarly and academic decisions:

The intended task of an administrator is, self-evidently, to administer policies—not to propound them. And the skills essential for effective paperwork, or effective delegation of authority, or ... effective fundraising—these are not skills associated with the scholarly wisdom necessary to define the university’s ultimate ideal.⁶

It should also be pointed out that not only do administrators exercise their power by default, but they are “frighteningly powerful” and “amply equipped to maintain their power.”⁷

Unlike faculty members, they do not have to attend to an already busy schedule of course assignments. They have the unique opportunity to influence all other members of the university community, since they control the flow of information. They can form close alliances with other constituencies since they alone have occasion to interact with every other group in the university community ... university administrators control the flow of ideas from group to group, and enjoy the broadest available range of personal contacts.⁸

Clearly, unless faculty challenge the administrative patterns of power in RTP proceedings, these patterns will remain as is.

I reiterate my belief here that college deans should be removed from the decision-making process

as a separate level of power and should be integrated into the college committees on a “one man–one vote” rule.

The same reasoning suggests that department chairs be integrated into department committees, although this is clearly less of an issue given the way that department chairs tend to act in RTP cases.

Whether university presidents could be similarly integrated into the university RTP committee is doubtful. But I believe it is not unreasonable to suggest that university presidents be taken out of the RTP proceedings altogether and that the final decisions rest in the hands of university faculty committees.

I hope that the analysis I provide here leads at least to attempts to bring such ideas for changing the RTP process, and the patterns of administrative power that dominate it, out into the open for broad-based discussion among interested campus constituents. Otherwise, it is certain that RTP proceedings will not change and the related faculty cynicism and resentment will continue. ■

Endnotes

¹ Anderson, 1994; Brennan, 1995; Brown and Kurland, 1990; Cox, 1993; Emerick, 1993; Hart, 1990; Hohm and Shore, 1993; Holden, 1997; Klein, 1997; Lawler, 1983; Magner, 1995; New York Times, 1993; Painton, 1990; Parini, 1995; Perley, 1997; Simpson, 1996; Sowell, 1994; Thompson, 1990; Turner, 1997; Winbush, 1995; Wood and Valenzuela, 1996; Wood, 1997; Yarmolinsky, 1996)

² SDSU has had as many as 35,900 stu-

dents during its peak year of 1987-88. However, in 1992 state budget cutbacks led to the eruption of massive campus upheaval brought about by the university president's attempt to lay off 146 tenured professors and completely eliminate nine departments.

The result was months of campus sit-ins and demonstrations, the rescinding of the layoffs, and, ultimately, the replacement of the university president in 1996. As a result of the 1992-93 disruptions, the student popula-

tion dropped to around 26,000 as students fled to more stable programs and departments in other universities. More recently, the student population has begun to rise again, hitting 29,300 in Fall of 1996, and order and calm appear to have returned to the campus.

³ Lawler, 1983.

⁴ Lawler, 60, emphasis added.

⁵ Lawler, 64, emphasis added.

⁶ Lawler, 64.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

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