

What Counts for Tenure

July 20, 2009

For all the talk about how research universities place an increasing value on teaching, a survey on tenure standards in political science departments finds not only that research remains dominant, but that poor teaching may be tolerated at doctoral-granting universities.

A national survey of department chairs found that superior research compensates for "mediocre teaching" at 55 percent of Ph.D. granting institutions, compared to 34 percent of master's institutions and 17 percent of bachelor's institutions. A contrasting split is evident at bachelor's institutions -- although many of them do not claim that their faculty are committed to research. At 64 percent of bachelor's institutions, superior teaching would compensate for mediocre research, while that's the case for 38 percent of master's institutions and 14 percent of doctoral institutions.

Further, the survey found that the "scholarship of teaching" ideas of Ernest L. Boyer -- in which colleges would see research and publication related to pedagogy or teaching as "counting" -- has not been embraced by a majority of departments in any sector, and by relatively few at doctoral institutions. Asked if they agreed that "teaching publications and substantive publications are equal" in tenure reviews evaluating research, only 11 percent of chairs at doctoral universities agreed. (The figures were 32 percent for master's institutions and 43 percent for bachelor's institutions).

The survey results appear in the new issue of the journal *PS: Political Science and Politics*, along with a paper on the survey by John M. Rothgeb Jr., a professor of political science at Miami University in Ohio and Betsy Burger, an administrative assistant in the department. (An abstract and purchasing information may be found here [<https://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=5877876&fulltextType=RA&fileId=S1049096509090829>].) They sent their surveys to more than 1,200 chairs of four-year programs in the United States, and had a response rate of 32 percent.

One goal of their research, they write, is to deal with the "pervasive lack of clarity" that frustrates junior faculty members. And they note that this lack of clarity, while upsetting across the board, has been linked by some researchers to limiting the ability of female and minority scholars to advance, as they may have fewer contacts to provide "clues" about the process.

Most chairs in the survey saw tenure as positive (in securing academic freedom) and most at institutions with graduate programs also saw it as negative (protecting incompetent professors). The data suggest that most candidates in the last five years who have come up for tenure have

received it, although the odds are much more favorable at bachelor's institutions. The survey found that research universities are three times more likely to have rejected a tenure candidate in the last five years, and more than twice as likely to have had a departmental decision reversed by higher authorities. (Some bachelor's departments, it should be noted, are relatively small and may not be evaluating candidates for tenure every year.)

Political Science Chairs Views and Experiences With Tenure, by Sector

Belief or Experience	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctoral
Tenure is a key to academic freedom	69%	84%	83%
Tenure shields incompetence faculty	49%%	63%%	56%%
Department has denied tenure in last five years	15%%	26%%	45%%
Higher authorities have reversed a tenure decision in last five years	14%	17%	30%
A tenured faculty member has been dismissed in last five years	3%	7%	3%
Department has been sued or had grievance filed over tenure decision in last five years	3%	9%	13%

With regard to the standards and procedures, a teaching/research split is clear, with service clearly a lower priority. There are also significant gaps on collegiality (much less of a factor at doctoral institutions) and external evaluation letters, which are both more important at doctoral institutions, which require more of them.

Tenure Standards and Procedures

Standard	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctoral
External evaluation letters are required	39%	51%	84%
More than five letters are required	10%	15%	52%
Collegiality is an important factor	63%	62%	31%
Research is the most important factor	6%	21%	76%
Teaching is the most important factor	48%	24%	3%
Teaching and research are equal	20%	37%	16%

Teaching, research and service are equal	16%	17%	3%
--	-----	-----	----

Some humanities disciplines have been reporting a creep of research requirements into tenure reviews at bachelor's institutions, but in political science, the survey suggests a clear divide. At bachelor's institutions, 82 percent report no book requirement, and 28 percent report no book or journal article requirement. At doctoral institutions, 65 percent report an expectation of at least one journal article a year. On books, 10 percent require at least one book, 17 percent require a university press book, and 11 percent require two books, one of them from a university press.

Departments from different sectors share some approaches to evaluating teaching. Overwhelming majorities across sectors report using teaching evaluations, teaching portfolios, syllabi, and peer review of teaching by other faculty members. But department chairs or deans are much more likely to be involved in peer review of teaching at bachelor's institutions than doctoral universities. For instance, 69 percent of chairs reported doing peer review of teaching at bachelor's institutions, compared to 27 percent at doctoral institutions. For peer review by deans or senior administrators, the figures were 31 percent for bachelor's institutions and 3 percent at doctoral.

— **Scott Jaschik**