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TENURE IN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS: A FIVE-YEAR REVIEW

by

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Tenure in Agricultural Economics: A Five-Year Review

While never far from criticism as being out-of-date or a haven for on-the-job retirees, tenure remains a cornerstone of academic life. Its defenders traditionally remind us of academic freedom, but economists, too, have had their say. For example, McPherson and Winston argue that job characteristics such as difficulty of evaluation, specialization, and long training periods make tenure more efficient than contracting. Taking a different approach, Carmichael claims that tenure is what distinguishes an academic department from a baseball team: "In baseball, the team owners through their agents, the managers, choose who is to play. In academics this task is performed by the incumbent members of the department. . . . Loosely, tenure is necessary because without it incumbents would never be willing to hire people who might turn out to be better than themselves." (p. 454)

These arguments for and against tenure, as important as they may be, provide little guidance concerning an issue most academics are likely to face at some time in their careers: who should get tenure and who should be denied? And upon what criteria should these decisions be made? As a department head and a member of the promotion and tenure committee, we recently faced a situation in which seven tenure candidates were to be evaluated in a two-year period. There was little in the way of recent departmental experience to guide us. We therefore surveyed all agricultural economics departments in the United States and Canada in order to gain what we could from their experiences. The survey requested both statistical data and a copy of the guidelines used in making tenure decisions. Thirty-nine departments responded.

We hope that the results of our survey, while never intended to be an exhaustive work on the subject, will serve the same purpose for others as it has for us--stimulating thought and discussion on the tasks, criteria, measurement, and documentation to be used in the tenure decision.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

We asked each department to provide the following information on each tenure decision they had made during 1984-1988: the candidate's appointment (research, teaching, extension, or combination thereof), the result of the decision, and whether the application was a first decision or reapplication. If the decision was to deny tenure, we also asked if the denial was made at the department, college, or campus level and the reason for the denial.

We collected data from 170 tenure decisions. Of these, 133 (78%) were granted tenure and 37 were rejected. Fourteen of the 170 decisions were reapplications; of those, nine were successful. One might also suspect that other potential tenure candidates left departments without applying when faced with poor prospects. As one department head wrote: "As cases emerge where substantial improvement will be needed in the rate of output, this is conveyed to untenured faculty. This sometimes leads to a decision on the part of an untenured faculty to seek employment elsewhere."

Acceptance rates were generally quite high. Without considering reapplications, 78 percent of the total decisions were favorable. Adjusting for reapplications, there were 156 persons evaluated for tenure during the five-year period. Of these, 142 were eventually granted tenure for an acceptance rate of 91 percent.

Such high rates of acceptance are apparently not uncommon. Lewis noted that in the early 1970's two-thirds of 511 colleges and universities surveyed granted tenure to at least seventy percent of all applicants. He went on to say that "It is not surprising then that most seem to qualify for tenure under rules that are so adaptable that no one quite knows what it takes to earn tenure." (p. 100)

Evidence presented by Lewis also suggested that rates of tenure acceptance varied considerably among institutions of higher learning. Of the thirty nine departments we surveyed, only 19 had experienced rejection of even one candidate during the five-year study period. Only four departments accounted for 16 of the 37 total rejections during 1984-88.

Sixteen of the 37 candidates rejected from all departments were decided at the departmental level. Of the remaining 21 candidates supported by their departments, nine were stopped at the college level, 11 at the campus level, and one by the Board of Regents.

Is one type of appointment more favored in tenure decisions than others? We collected data on 46 decisions in which the candidate was at least 50% extension, 96 decisions in which the candidate was at least 50% research, and 36 in which the candidate was at least 50% teaching. Of these, 20% with heavy extension appointments, 22% with heavy research, and 30% with heavy teaching were denied tenure. If there is a more "dangerous" appointment, it appears to be teaching rather than extension!

Is "publish or perish" the rule so many seem to think it is? Our results suggest that such is the case. Of the 37 rejections, 23 (62 percent) were explicitly for lack of publications. In one case, this reason was even given for a candidate holding a 100% extension appointment. The remaining

reasons for rejection were scattered among teaching, poorly developed extension programs, and unfocused research. Also included in this group was a rejection for "poor collegiality" and another for "lack of terminal degree".

TENURE CRITERIA AND DOCUMENTATION

We asked each of the departments for copies of the written guidelines used for tenure decisions. The documents we received were in many cases inadequate by themselves to guide an informed tenure decision. Fourteen departments forwarded no documents at all or provided only general statements concerning tasks to be considered. Ten more provided documents that were improvements, but still left the critical issues of criteria, measurement, and documentation quite vague. Fifteen sent documents which we felt would adequately provide guidance to candidates and administrators for determining when adequate work had been done to grant tenure.

Even among the 15 complete documents, there was considerable variation. For example, all had criteria, but effective criteria must also have standards if what Lewis calls "the rubber band of measurement" (p. 94) is to be avoided. In some documents we reviewed, there were explicit criteria (e.g., "curriculum design and updating"), standards (e.g., "periodically reevaluate course content, readings, and goals: revise appropriately"), and the sources for evaluation (e.g., "teaching materials" and "peer evaluation"). In most cases, however, more general statements of criteria were included in the guidelines we reviewed.

That so many departments failed to send more complete guidelines was, we admit, a bit surprising. However, they may use guidelines formulated at college or university levels, or they may get by with what they have. If the

latter is the case, we wish these departments well if a decision they make reaches litigation.

But rather than pursue the question of who has what document, we chose to examine the variety of criteria included in the fifteen statements we judged to be complete. Our goal was not to somehow find an "optimal" document; we instead describe the variety of options departments have chosen. Furthermore, our discussion will focus on criteria rather than procedural matters such as the role of the department head, faculty, and college review committees. And, finally, so as not to appear critical of individual departments, we at times quote tenure documents without naming the department from which they were obtained.

Teaching, Research, and Service

The teaching, research, and service activities were emphasized in all of the documents, but there was considerable difference in what was included in these tasks. Job descriptions were seldom mentioned, and how to handle candidates with appointments in more than one area was virtually ignored.

Teaching, included in all of the complete documents, was most uniformly defined. Much of the variation among descriptions of teaching concerned advising undergraduate and graduate students--some explicitly recognized this activity but many did not.

Research was less uniformly defined. It commonly included "output" in various written and oral forms. In some cases research also included attending professional meetings, obtaining grants, and other forms of "scholarly activity" or "creative work".

Service was by far the least uniformly defined. In some cases, service referred to the formalized extension function of the typical land grant institution. In other cases, service referred to committee, commission, and "administrative" functions, both within and outside the university. And, for some, service included all of the above activities and about anything else (including consulting) that could not be defined as classroom teaching or research. In contrast, one institution considered extension as teaching or scholarly activity and placed all other service in a secondary role which could not solely be used to grant tenure.

Peer Review

Peer review was most uniformly recognized in the evaluation of research productivity. There was consistent emphasis on refereed journal articles and other publications for those with research appointments. One department defined "refereed" not in terms of where an article is published, but by "whether it can be rejected by other professionals".

Peer review and evaluation were less commonly stressed for teaching and extension, although some regarded it as essential. While few departments explicitly ask for evaluations from clientele on the worth of research, it is quite common to look beyond peers to "users" for evaluation of teaching and extension. Students and attendees at programs and workshops were often mentioned.

Letters of evaluation from recognized leaders in the candidate's field were common to most guidelines, but some departments were more specific than others about who should provide those letters. For example, one department

asks for "letters of evaluation from at least five recognized leaders in the field who have not been closely associated with, nor selected by, the candidate".

Recognition of a candidate's contributions to the profession by peers beyond colleagues in the same department or on the same campus is important in most tenure guidelines. This requirement extends beyond research. For example, one department's guidelines for extension explicitly state that "the evidence must show that the candidate is recognized both within and outside the university in his or her field". Those with teaching and extension appointments are therefore well-advised to become involved in national or regional professional activities to (among other things) increase awareness of their contributions.

Multidisciplinary Work

One issue we felt needed more recognition in almost all of the documents was the challenge of handling multidisciplinary work and collaboration with colleagues. Joint authorship, team teaching, and team development of extension programs are encouraged and more likely to play important roles in future tenure decisions. Yet most documents were silent on the issue of evaluating the quality of contributions by individual faculty to multidisciplinary and joint programs and publications. One department deals explicitly, if not entirely satisfactorily, with this problem by making it the department head's role to "establish as clearly as possible the role of the candidate in the joint effort."

Journal Articles

Are journal articles all that count? Evidence from reasons for rejecting candidates because of lack of publications aside, the answer appears to be "no". Teaching and extension are consistently recognized in the tenure guidelines; in fact, teaching is frequently emphasized more than research. One department speaks specifically to extension: "The evidence of superior performance is not acceptance by a refereed journal, but clientele acceptance and approval, verified by successful application and change--difficult standards to satisfy. . . publication in other outlets such as industry magazines, bulletins, and specialty journals should be considered as appropriate evidence of accomplishment."

Weighing Factors

While "analytic" and "objective" procedures for making tenure decisions have been proposed (Saaty and Ramanujam), we found little evidence of such procedures in the documents we reviewed. Some provided no guidance at all for combining various factors in an evaluation, and others showed a wide range of approaches. For example, one school requires "demonstrated excellence" in at least two of research, teaching, and service. Another department has a five-scale rating system (excellent, very good, good, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory); a rating of "excellent" must be attained in either teaching or scholarly achievement, a rating of "good" in the other of these two, and a rating of "good" in service. The most elaborate scheme we found required both a ranking of five or better on an eight-point scale of teaching/job effectiveness and satisfaction of at least three of ten professional development criteria. These ten criteria included "publication of at least

three bulletins, pamphlets, abstracts, or the inclusion in appropriate conference proceedings of scholarly efforts representing the results of research, professional accomplishments, or creative activities" and "evidence of service to the University and/or larger communities."

Tenuring "Good People"

Lewis argues that since tenure guidelines and standards are so amorphous, social or personal behavior criteria are important in the evaluation process. While we do not doubt this, we were surprised to see issues of collegiality explicitly appear in tenure criteria. One department states that "review of each candidate shall be in conformance with the master plan pertinent to their case. Candidates shall show a willingness to adjust to their unit's strategic plan." Another department expresses the matter this way: "In judging the fitness of the candidate for granting of tenure, it is also appropriate to consider certain personal qualities, such as willingness to accept and cooperate in assignments, professional integrity as evidenced by the performance of duties and the demonstrated breadth and depth of commitment to the University's goals and missions."

Wording such as this may cause an eyebrow or two to be raised by strict defenders of academic freedom. Such is apparently not the case among judges, however. In her article "Federal Court Involvement in Academic Personnel Decisions", Lee found that: "Faculty whose personalities or research interests make them misfits to their departmental colleagues will find little sympathy from courts, who have consistently upheld the right of colleges and their individual academic departments to determine their own research and teaching missions and to make personnel decisions in light of them." (p. 47)

MAINTAINING TENURE

Declining enrollments and continuing budget cuts may make the issue of termination of tenured faculty as important as that of granting tenure. We found this issue largely ignored in the departmental documents. The New York University Law Review (note) reviewed immorality, incompetence, insubordination, and financial exigency as areas in which courts have supported the dismissal of tenured faculty.

Budgetary reasons for granting tenure are touched upon in one department's tenure document. There, the following question is part of tenure deliberations: "How does the position fit into the strategy of strength in the department or section? Are priorities stable enough to justify a tenured appointment in this area?" There is, however, no evidence that such a standard is applied to faculty once tenure is granted.

Continued competence of tenured faculty is generally not addressed in most tenure documents, in spite of increasing concerns expressed about the upcoming elimination of mandatory retirement. In fact, formal faculty evaluations are required infrequently (if at all) in a number of departments once tenure has been granted. With no performance evaluations to draw upon, any tenure termination for lack of performance would be difficult at best.

The University of California at Berkeley has developed a proposal entitled "The Problem of Grossly Incompetent Faculty: Recommended Policies and Procedures". The proposal defines "gross incompetence" as teaching that "as measured by the usual standards of intellectual and professional competence in university instruction, is so inadequate that it is a disservice to the students." The proposal, unapproved as of this writing, will enable the

university to terminate tenured faculty who meet the "gross incompetency" test.

Most schools appear to be adopting a less aggressive approach to termination of tenured faculty. Even the requirement of periodic review of tenured faculty was defeated at the University of Minnesota. One professor was quoted as saying, "All the reviews in the world are not going to do anything except for one thing. They're going to waste faculty time." (Smith, p. 1)

CONCLUSION

The results of the survey suggest that tenure acceptance rates were quite high at agricultural economics departments during 1984-88. Half of the departments making tenure decisions during that time rejected no candidates, and only four departments accounted for almost half of all tenure rejections by the 39 departments we surveyed. More rejections came at college and campus levels than at the departmental level.

We found considerable variation in both completeness and content of tenure documents submitted by departments as part of our survey. Of the 39 departments responding, only 15 sent documents we felt were sufficiently complete to guide tenure decisions through administrative channels and, perhaps, through the court system as well. Of the 15 we judged complete, there was little agreement on everything from the definition of service to criteria and standards to treating multidisciplinary work. We are tempted to speculate, along with Lewis, whether there may be a relationship between high acceptance rates and that "no one quite knows what it takes to earn tenure."

Finally, we were surprised that the continuation of tenure is virtually ignored in departmental tenure guidelines. We face a situation in which tight budgets and elimination of mandatory retirement may make continuing tenure, rather than granting it, a more common issue in the future.

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