

Tenure may be criticized, but it still remains

BY LORI NOTARO
FOR THE YELL

The tenure system at UNLV has existed as long as the university itself.

Many university employees accept the tenure system as a given—always had it, always will. But not everyone feels the system should continue to exist as it has.

Some feel the evaluation process is too easy on instructors and that too much emphasis is placed on research at the expense of teaching, factors which possibly contribute to keeping ineffective teachers employed at the university.

According to Webster's New Universal Dictionary, to have tenure means having "permanent possession, as of an office or position." The tenure system of hiring was designed to protect the First Amendment rights of instructors by allowing them freedom to voice opinions contrary to those of school administrators without the fear of losing their jobs.

"There are far too many people in positions of power in higher education who believe that solutions to problems can be found in oppression and termination," said John Unrue, senior vice president and provost of UNLV. "Tenure remains an extremely necessary safeguard of academic freedom."

In addition, the tenure system guarantees what the dictionary said it did—permanence. Instructors who have tenure are generally guaranteed employment for as long as they are able to perform the duties they were hired to do.

Professors must pass two reviews

At UNLV, tenure-track instructors (those who work full time and have come to the university with the intention of eventually becoming tenured) are given two main reviews at both the department and administrative levels before they can be approved for tenure.

The mid-tenure review occurs

after an instructor has been with the university for three years. At this stage, the instructor's progress is assessed and advice is given on how to improve weak areas.

Robert Skaggs, chair of the Faculty Senate, described this review as the point at which an instructor can be told to keep up the good work, to work harder on certain areas or, "You're light years from making it, you may want to transfer to another school."

The tenure review, which occurs during the sixth year of employment, constitutes an instructor's "make or break" time. At this point, an instructor is either approved for tenure or fired from the university.

During these reviews, instructors are evaluated on four criteria: service, collegiality, teaching and research. These reviews are first conducted by the chair of their department, then by all of the chairs in their college, followed by the university administration, and, finally, the Board of Regents.

The first criterion, service to the university and other Clark County schools, includes organizing seminars, and participation in faculty governance through membership in the Faculty Senate.

The next requirement for tenure, collegiality, merely involves an evaluation of instructor's personalities to insure that they are able to work well with others.

The teaching criterion is basically self-evident, but the only information usually taken into consideration on this issue are student evaluations. While these evaluations are important and often quite helpful, they can also be flawed by personal bias (They are often discounted for this very reason).

Peer reviews are sometimes conducted to ensure thorough evaluations, but such use is restricted to only a few departments.

The final standard by which an instructor's job performance is judged is research. All tenure-track instructors at UNLV are required to do research in their respective fields and to published articles or books on their sub-

jects. Skaggs said an emphasis is placed on reviewed literature because it reflects an assessment by an unbiased third party.

Teaching standards lose out to research

Out of the four criteria evaluated for tenure (service, collegiality, teaching and research), some feel there is a disproportionate emphasis on research.

Tenured English Professor Joseph McCullough said that sometimes merely mediocre UNLV instructors are given tenure because of the noteworthy research they have done.

"If there is a softness in the judging process, it is in evaluating teaching," said McCullough. "Universities could do more in accessing and developing teachers. Rewards and promotions tend to depend more heavily on research."

Dr. Andrew Martinez, a non-tenure-track business instructor, agreed there is an overemphasis on research.

"A lot of universities like to think of themselves as research universities," said Martinez. "I think they should stress teaching more. There's room for research, but not at the expense of teaching."

He added that he feels part of this emphasis is due to UNLV trying to match the research standards of the University of Nevada, Reno.

"I think there is competition between north and south," Martinez said.

John Unrue, senior vice-president and provost at UNLV, said that teaching standards are weighed less heavily than research in the tenure evaluation because they are difficult to evaluate accurately.

"I believe we have a serious obligation to set high standards in teaching as a criterion for tenure," said Unrue. "In my opinion, we have not been as demanding for excellence in teaching as we should be. There are many reasons for this. It is very hard to get an accurate measurement of teaching performances. I think peer evaluation should be more widespread, but it has to

be conducted very carefully to be certain the peer is objective."

Acquiring status may be too easy

Another fault that some find with the tenure system is the apparent ease with which tenure-track professors are able to become tenured.

McCullough said that most tenure-tracking instructors get tenure almost automatically.

"Instructors are hired with the expectation that they will all get tenure if they do good work," McCullough said. "There has been a tendency to give the benefit of the doubt to the instructor. People tend to be given tenure here as a matter of course."

Unrue cited UNLV's hiring standards as the reason most tenure-track instructors get tenure easily. He said for tenure-track instructors to even be hired, they must be good enough to be expected to qualify for tenure in their sixth year.

"We have a rigorous screening process for every instructor we hire at UNLV," Unrue said. "We expect the people we hire to be tenured and we are surprised when they don't get tenured."

An evaluation by the Board of Regents is the final step in the tenure process and the last check on an instructor's abilities, but even this process seems automatic. Regent Shelley Berkley gave a reason for this "pro-forma" approval.

"The board is comprised of lay people," said Berkley. "It is extraordinarily difficult to second-guess people who are involved in academia for a living. Unless there is a problem, to second-guess after it (the referral for tenure) has gone through all of the stages is not necessarily wise."

Though the hiring process may attempt to eliminate poor instructors, there is always a chance that some will be hired. Martinez said the tenure system at UNLV has allowed some of these instructors to retain their jobs.

"I think it's true of any system (that there are flaws)," said Martinez. "You hire some highly ef-

fective people at the university system and you just hope they'll move on."

Tenured professors can be fired

Though the tenure system may keep some merely average, or even poor, teacher employed for several years, tenured instructors can be fired if their work performance is deemed unsatisfactory.

Under UNLV's list of rules and disciplinary procedures for faculty members, a reason for termination is "incompetence or inefficiency in performing the duties for which the faculty member is employed."

In addition, tenured instructors can be fired for insubordination, committing a criminal act, academic dishonesty or being under the influence of intoxicants.

To give instructors the benefit of the doubt, firing usually cannot occur unless they receive two successive unsatisfactory reviews by the department chair. Instructors are also entitled to a hearing at which they are allowed to defend themselves against charges brought against them.

Students taking classes from ineffective tenured instructors are left with little recourse but to put up with the classes or drop it.

Firing a tenured professor is usually not publicized. Skaggs said the reputations of those involved is a reason for this. "Generally, you don't hear about it," said Skaggs. "It's embarrassing to the faculty member and it's embarrassing to the school."

UNLV's tenure system may be imperfect, but many on campus think it is a necessary form of job protection. Besides protecting the First Amendment rights of instructors, tenure also provides instructors in certain fields with long-term careers.

"Tenure helps instructors in the fields on philosophy, history and English because they must seek employment in a university," said Skaggs. "Tenure is more important to those people because there is no outside job market."

Athletes

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games because they did not attend some of their classes—due in part to the team's road schedule.

Asked about the current controversy at UNLV, Landa said, "I think we have to start looking at the positive aspects of UNLV

instead of the negative. Moreover, basketball has contributed a lot to UNLV and there is no reason why the two cannot work hand-in-hand."

Knight asserts that UNLV is a very young university. "The campus is only 30 years old and still in its infancy," he said. "Everything we deal with here (UNLV) we tend to overreact (to) because we are not very well

versed in dealing with these problems."

"What it all comes down to is dedication and goals and with perseverance and hard work they (student athletes) can have the best of both worlds," Shepherd said. "But that is their decision."

Program

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And, the program must have its own building. Planning for the building is caught up in a lawsuit that won't be heard until late summer.

Hugh Burgess, head of the

program, was unavailable for comment.

Because this is too late to initiate accreditation, Unrue and Burgess visited the National Architectural Accrediting Board on April 1 and presented an alternative plan that would serve as temporary space until a building is built.

If approved, the space may make it possible for accreditation even if the building isn't completed in two years. Its important to meet the two-year deadline because a two-year grace period protecting students graduating now and in the next two years will lapse.

Unrue said he was very optimistic about the meeting with the NAAB. "The burden," he said, "for achieving the goal rests with the university."

The next step is to find the alternative space. Unrue said the UNLV Foundation will help find the space and arrange the financing.

The Rebel Yell

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