

## Post-Tenure Review as Trojan Horse

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At the June 2005 meeting of our Board of Trustees, Interim President Ed Richardson announced AU would establish a post-tenure review (PTR) policy intended to assure the public of “accountability” within the academy. Predictably, trustees expressed approval and faculty expressed misgivings.

The faculty and administration at AU have debated PTR over the intervening months. The Steering Committee of the University Senate took the lead in reviewing PTR policies at other universities and developing for discussion purposes two PTR models (a “universal” model where all tenured faculty would be reviewed, and a “trigger” model where only faculty with poor annual performance evaluations would be reviewed). The merits of PTR and strengths and weaknesses of the different PTR models were debated during an AAUP forum in early October 2005, the Fall meeting of the University Faculty later that month, and the November 2005 meeting of the University Senate.<sup>1</sup>

There matters stood until late Spring 2006, when Dr. Richardson directed Provost John Heilman to develop a PTR policy to be field tested during the 2006-2007 academic year. The resulting draft, distributed to the Board at its June 2006 meeting, bore little resemblance to either of the models developed by the Steering Committee, nor did it reflect the substance of discussions and concerns expressed by faculty during the Fall. Major points of divergence included the absence of any appeals process or provision for peer participation in the review. Most troubling was the direct connection between PTR and dismissal processes.

The AAUP’s statement on PTR makes it clear – as do policies at most universities – that PTR should not be the Trojan horse for a dismissal policy or be used to undermine the institution of tenure. The AAUP’s position is that PTR is a politically motivated solution to a phantom problem, but if PTR cannot be avoided it should be designed to ensure that faculty perform at a level consistent with the expectations associated with their having been tenured in the first place.<sup>2</sup> Where established with such intent, PTR policies around the country seem to have had little negative consequence. But the case of Virginia State University shows how PTR can be used to chill academic freedom on a campus.<sup>3</sup>

Discussions between the faculty leadership and the administration at AU continued through the Summer and into Fall 2006, leading to the most recent open campus debate on PTR at the October 2006 meeting of the University Faculty. Discussions themselves were principled,

impassioned, and occasionally humorous. By a vote of 89 to 11, the faculty rejected the concept of PTR.

In over a year of public debate and innumerable individual and small group discussions across campus, a common set of themes have emerged. Fundamentally, faculty embrace the principle of accountability but question the need for yet another evaluative process. Faculty go through annual performance evaluations, which are the sole basis for faculty salary increases at AU. These evaluations typically involve performance in teaching, research and other professional responsibilities, all of which have their own evaluative processes that feed into the annual evaluations. Many key evaluative criteria (e.g., teaching loads, publications, graduate advising) are reported for a three year period so that “annual” refers to the periodicity of reviews and not the material being reviewed. Most tellingly, faculty have noted the absence of evidence that PTR has had any beneficial impact at any other university, and that no compelling argument has been advanced in support of an additional evaluative process.

In follow-up meetings with the President and Provost, the faculty leadership has continued to engage the administration over this issue, doubtful of both need and motivation, but convinced that simply turning our backs would result in a policy detrimental to academic freedom and tenure. Only time will tell if honest engagement with this administration was a wise course of action, or even possible.

### **The Underlying Issue**

At formal and informal discussions of post-tenure review with trustees, the subject of dismissal usually cropped up with a challenge masked as a question: “How many tenured faculty have been dismissed at Auburn?” This question reveals what many think is the underlying motivation behind the push for PTR. The simple answer to the question is “None in two decades.” To some trustees, this proves the tenure system is broken, for surely (they reason) over a period of 20 years at least one of the many hundreds of tenured faculty must have done something to deserve dismissal (poor performance, moral turpitude, felony conviction). As often is the case, simple questions and answers yield limited and often skewed understanding. Formal dismissal procedures are not the only mechanism by which tenured faculty leave the university after transgressing accepted professional or moral standards. After a series of critical annual performance evaluations and no salary increases, some tenured faculty find better outlets for their talents elsewhere. Others leave through negotiated settlements that do not utilize the formal dismissal process.

This said, most faculty recognize that there are a handful of people at Auburn whose performance and continued employment frankly is a source of embarrassment, and some of them are faculty. In most cases of which I am aware, movement towards dismissal of these individuals has been thwarted either by unwillingness of administrators to risk legal challenges, or because administrators have not done a careful job of documenting that problems exist. The problem at Auburn is compounded by a dismissal policy lacking criteria beyond professional “fitness” to carry out assigned responsibilities. As faculty leaders, administrators, and trustees have debated the merits and motivations of PTR, there has emerged a recognition that our current dismissal policy may be flawed.

As this is written the administration has not decided how to proceed with PTR. One possibility is that they will proceed with field testing some version of PTR, taking into consideration faculty comments at the October University Faculty meeting. A second possibility is that the administration will focus efforts on improving annual performance evaluations and evaluations of teaching, and working with the appropriate faculty committees to review and revise if necessary the existing faculty dismissal policy. Each of these changes address core issues of accountability and, in my view, should be addressed before deciding whether to move forward with a PTR policy.

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<sup>1</sup> The University Senate has representatives from central administration, students, staff, and professional employees and meets 10 times a year; approximately two-thirds of the 90+ Senators are faculty. The University Faculty meet twice a year and membership is limited to employees with faculty rank. Elected officers of the University Faculty also serve as officers of the Senate.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/PTR.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/protectrights/legal/Updates-speeches/post-ten-review.htm>