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Academic Tenure: What Does It Mean?

JOAN M. WALKER

Tenure is an integral aspect of academia. Because tenured faculty give esteem to individual physical therapy programs and to the profession as a whole, understanding the process of attaining tenure is vital to all physical therapy educators. Tenure in universities is described, and the process of attaining tenure is outlined. Criteria for tenure, factors related to transfer of faculty between universities, and considerations for terminating tenured faculty are also discussed. Departmental chairmen have a responsibility to ensure that the faculty members understand the tenure process and are given the opportunity to meet tenure criteria.

Key Words: Faculty, Physical therapy, Tenure.

Responses to a recent survey of physical therapy (PT) faculty members in several foreign countries revealed that those educators often did not understand the term tenure.1 The questions “Do you have tenure?” and “Are you in a tenure-stream appointment?” were largely understood only by tenured faculty members. Those without tenure often asked, “What does this mean?” Although some of these educators were in non-university-based programs, many were employed by a university that confers tenure, as indicated by responses of others from the same programs. Similar data were not located for American PT faculty members; however, a 1982 report of American medical school faculty members and departmental chairmen indicated that a “considerable communications gap” exists between the faculty members and chairmen with respect to promotion deliberations.2 As will be shown in this article, promotion is intimately related to tenure appointments.

The purpose of this review article is to describe academic tenure: what it is, criteria used for granting tenure, the review process, transfer of pretenure time or tenure status, and termination of tenured faculty. Recommendations for studies of PT faculty on aspects of tenure will be made. It is important that faculty members know before accepting an appointment whether their appointment is in a tenure track, the criteria for obtaining tenure, and the time period before review for tenure is considered.

WHAT IS TENURE?

Tenure is a well-established practice in universities of many countries and is distinct from the job security or job protection that exists, for example, in the American civil service system or the British national health system. “Academic tenure is an achieved—not an ascribed status.”3 Tenure is awarded to an individual faculty member usually only after an extensive peer review, following a period of pretenure employment, and achievement of a certain faculty rank.

Providing job security and academic freedom to the individual are two purposes of tenure strongly defended by faculty members.2 The tenure system developed from a need to protect academic institutions against adverse pressures, to allow faculty members to articulate positions and philosophies without threat of any challenge to personal employment, and thus to provide a free learning environment for students.2, 4-7 The tenure system should eliminate hiring and firing practices that owe more to subjectivity than to objectivity. Protection from adverse pressures, however, was only ranked fourth in a recent survey of the positive attributes of tenure.2 Hill and Wolf note that tenure is now primarily equated with job and economic security, and only secondarily with academic freedom.8 Brewster considered that the provision of academic freedom should prevent intellectual mediocrity.6 Although tenure provides some job security to the individual, it does not provide absolute job security. Tenured faculty members may be fired for numerous reasons that will be discussed in this article. Tenure does not provide, or imply, freedom from any normative controls. A tenured member is expected, and trusted, to act responsibly.7

The tenure system enables an institution to attract, maintain, and build a strong faculty with quality...

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programs. Tenure is considered to provide responsible leadership and continuity. Faculty members’ pursuit of the goals of teaching, research, and service without concern for renewal of appointment, competition between colleagues, or the need to seek alternative employment are facilitated by the tenure system. Tenure also signifies recognition by peers of an individual’s high achievement and strong potential for continued performance, growth, and scholarly contribution. The award of tenure represents the acceptance of the individual as a permanent member of the university community. Tenure appointments are important administrative decisions because of budget implications as well as personal implications. In the United States, once tenure is attained, the appointment is terminated only for just cause and after due process, except in the case of retirement at the stipulated age. The American Association of University Professors, for example, has delineated criteria for termination of tenure which have been accepted by the governing boards of most universities. Thus, an individual tenured at age 35 may be part of that faculty for 30 to 35 years before reaching the age of mandatory retirement.

Identified weaknesses of the tenure system are that it encourages the retention of ineffective faculty members, may allow members to avoid institutional commitments, and prevents infusion of younger individuals into the system. Hill and Wolf estimate that 94 percent of faculty members in American universities and colleges serve in institutions that confer tenure and that by 1990, some 90 percent of professors will have tenure. They relate current difficulties with tenure to the rapid expansion of academic institutions in the sixties, which greatly increased the competition for available faculty. This competition, the authors claim, resulted in tenure being granted to younger faculty members, often after very short probationary periods, and in many cases, tenure was considered automatic. Currently, however, enrollment is declining, and in many departments, faculty turnover is gained only by the opening of positions through retirement. Older, tenured faculty members may be less able to adjust curricula to meet changing needs; flexibility of education is therefore reduced by predominantly tenured faculties. Efforts to achieve representation and encourage advancement by women and minorities also are hindered.

In some institutions, such as the California community college system, tenure is granted after two years of full-time teaching, which encourages the use of part-time teachers. An institution may delay opening a full-time position and hire part-time instructors while determination is made on enrollment stability or growth and on funding. Although this practice may have economic advantages for an institution, it also is considered to be detrimental; part-time faculty members may lack a full commitment to the institution.

Advocates of abolishing tenure state that the tenure system encourages intellectual mediocrity and releases faculty members from the normal pressures that encourage the high performance required to create strong academic institutions. Deans can usually cite cases of faculty members who, on achieving tenure, show decreased commitment to excellence in teaching, are less available to students, show decreased grant writing and publication activities, and decreased involvement in university and community affairs. It is vital that tenured faculty continue to display the characteristics for which they were granted tenure. This is a responsibility of each and every faculty member; lesser performance calls the tenure system into serious doubt.

CRITERIA FOR TENURE

Institutions vary with regard to the emphasis and priorities of criteria that must be met to hold a tenured position. Most universities have established formal procedures for fulfilling rank and time requirements for the award of tenure. Studies show variability in both the minimum rank and the minimum number of years in that rank before tenure is granted. Generally, in American universities, after a pretenure period not greater than seven years, assistant professors are promoted to associate professors, or their full-time faculty appointment is terminated. Assistant professors, and occasionally instructors, may be granted tenure when strong value to the institution is demonstrated. In some countries, such as South Africa and Australia, tenure may be granted at the rank of lecturer with no change in rank status. Not all countries use the ranks of assistant and associate professor. Equivalent ranks may be lecturer grade I and senior lecturer.

Holcomb and Roush surveyed tenure policies in 79 American allied health institutions that offered at least a baccalaureate degree. Their data showed the interrelationship between ranks, degrees held by an individual, promotion, and tenure appointments. Most of these institutions generally gave tenure appointments to faculty members with the ranks of associate or full professor. Twenty-three percent only gave the rank of full professor to those with a doctorate. In 92 percent of the responding institutions, however, a person without a doctorate could hold a tenured appointment.

Criteria for tenure may include performance in the following: research, publications, teaching, obtaining grants or contracts, clinical service (clinical faculty only), professional service (eg, grant study sections and editorial boards), administrative and community duties, community service, and professional attitudes.
and ethics.\textsuperscript{13} Seeking new knowledge, that is, basic research, may be regarded in some universities and departments as "the single most significant attribute considered worthy of tenure or promotion."\textsuperscript{14} Research accomplishment, grant activities, publication in peer-reviewed journals, and teaching excellence are commonly the main criteria for promotion and tenure considerations. Holcomb and Roush's study of American allied health institutions revealed that teaching experience ranked higher than research or publications (88, 81, and 81\%, respectively).\textsuperscript{12} Student and peer evaluation of teaching performance ranked higher than grant activities (81, 81, and 63\%, respectively). Clinical faculty are expected to demonstrate scholarly activities, in addition to excellence in teaching and patient care, to achieve tenure.\textsuperscript{4} Some faculty believe that excellence in one or two categories should suffice.

A recent study also showed that faculty members and chairmen of medical schools often have different perceptions of promotion criteria: "Chairmen had a much broader view of what activities were important."\textsuperscript{14} Chairmen rated nearly twice as many activities as desirable or essential as did the faculty members. Both faculty members (n = 393) and chairmen (n = 22) gave top rating to being primary author of journal articles and rated publishing in refereed journals second. Chairmen, however, ranked the following higher than did faculty members: being professionally respected by departmental members, presenting papers by invitation, teaching medical and/or graduate students, having strong letters of reference from recognized experts in your field, and providing competent patient care. Patient care and teaching were not among the faculty members’ 11 most highly rated activities.\textsuperscript{14}

Schools, or departments, with large clinical faculties, such as medical or physical therapy schools, usually have nontenure tracks with special ranks for appointment of individuals to the faculty who are not employed by the school.\textsuperscript{6,12} These titles include adjunct clinical professor and associate faculty. To accommodate for and to encourage clinical excellence, a "special professoriate" tenure track for salaried clinical faculty may be offered. This track permits an individual, whose limited research activity precludes his meeting all of the normal institutional criteria for tenure, to obtain tenure at the rank of clinical associate professor.\textsuperscript{5,16} The criteria for this special track may differ from that of the regular tenure track and will include outstanding clinical performance and endeavors. REVIEW PROCESS

The tenure review process normally involves several committees at different levels of the university. Commonly, only tenured faculty are members of university tenure review committees. Usually a tenure and promotions committee is formed at the departmental or divisional level to advise the chairman. When a department or division lacks an adequate number of tenured faculty to form the initial committee, members are recruited from a larger subdivision of the institution; for example, from the health sciences or medical school that includes the physical therapy department. The chairman recommends to the dean who then recommends to the university-wide tenure and promotions committee. This committee makes recommendations to the academic vice president and president on promotion and tenure. The university-wide tenure and promotions committee's recommendations to the president are heavily influenced by the evaluations and recommendations of the department chairman. Gjerde and Colombo note that discrepancy in perceptions of promotion criteria between faculty members and chairmen may be detrimental to the initial and influential departmental review.\textsuperscript{14}

The tenure review process normally occurs in the individual's sixth year of employment at the institution. Adequate notice of the tenure appointment review should be afforded members in the tenure track. Preparation of the individual's dossier usually is performed by the chairman. Besides the curriculum vitae, this dossier may include copies of grant applications and reports, publications, letters of reference, copies of the individual's course outlines, student evaluations of both the course(s) and the instructor, and other relevant supporting materials. Letters of reference are sought from colleagues, both within the institution or local area and at previous places of employment, and also from graduated students the individual has taught. Another important component consists of letters of reference from experts in the individual's field of research or clinical expertise, including some who are not personally acquainted with the individual. The chairman has the responsibility of sending these experts copies of the individual's publications for review. Preparation of the dossier should commence several months before the review date.

The review process varies between institutions of differing academic levels; for example, between community colleges that only award baccalaureate degrees and universities with doctorate programs. The chairman should fully inform the faculty member of the attributes highly rated within that institution for a tenure appointment. An integral part of the tenure process should be some ongoing evaluation system for faculty members during the pretenure period.\textsuperscript{3,16} Fairness demands that critical evaluation of an individual’s performance not be left until the year of tenure decision. Such reviews of performance should foster the individual’s...
professional growth and development. Annual reviews should include peer observation and evaluation of performance, students’ evaluation of performance, and documentation of activities by the pretenure faculty member. There should be a commitment to constructive criticism for the benefit of the individual. The program director or the chairman of the department or the school bears the responsibility for ensuring regular reviews of the faculty for both promotion and tenure as well as for annual merit salary increments. Faculty members have the right to request a review when this process is not regularized, and for their own benefit should do so. Occasionally, tenure is gained by default when procedures are not followed and an individual has been a member of the faculty for the requisite number of pretenure years.

TRANSFER

When a nontenured faculty member transfers from one university to another, the time period within the statutory six years before being considered for tenure at the first university is counted in full or in part at the new institution. Thus, if a faculty member has been in one institution for three years, tenure review at the new institution could be carried out after an additional three years. The number of years counted may be a negotiable item at the time of appointment and certainly should be established and agreed upon in writing at that time by both the institution and the prospective faculty member. When a program or a department is seeking to attract currently tenured faculty members from other institutions, tenure often is transferred only when the individuals have achieved high rank (such as full professor or dean) and have national and international renown in their field. Again, tenure is a negotiable item at the time of appointment.

TERMINATION

After appropriate hearing and grievance committees have been conducted, a tenured faculty member may be dismissed for various reasons, including "serious defects in performance, or for personal behavior, such as crimes of a major type." Bona fide financial exigency of the institution or discontinuance of a program or a department also are criteria. Generally, however, a university will release part-time faculty and untenured faculty before tenured faculty. This process is now occurring in the United States, with decreasing student enrollments and with universities experiencing serious fiscal restraints. After denial of tenure and regardless of rank, a time period of one year is normally given to individuals between notice of nonreappointment and actual termination. This interval, usually the seventh year of employment at the university, allows the individual time to seek an alternative appointment.

DISCUSSION

In the United States, supply and demand in the market have led to more tenure decisions being based on an increasingly higher quality of performance. These changes are reflected in the processes, procedures, and criteria that are used. Although controversy continues concomitant with evaluation of the role of tenure, the need for tenure, and the modifications in the tenure process, faculty members in institutions that confer tenure should be fully acquainted with procedures and policies of that institution.

Although a survey of PT faculty in five foreign countries revealed a lack of understanding of the term tenure, survey data were not located for North American faculty. Apart from Scully and Cox’s 1978 report that 37 percent of American PT faculty had tenure, data are unavailable on review processes used, highly ranked criteria, pretenure time, and variability between PT programs in institutions of different academic levels. That PT program directors may be knowledgeable about tenure within their institution does not necessarily imply that faculty members understand the process. Physical therapy faculties, like medical school faculties, often include a number of individuals who have joined the faculty after several years as clinicians. These therapists, in particular, may be unfamiliar with the academic tenure system and the performance required of them to achieve tenure status. Their knowledge of tenure is more important where a special professorial tenure track for clinicians is not offered.

Prospective PT faculty members should be cognizant of whether the offered appointment is in the tenure track or not, of the time period allowed before tenure review, and of the criteria for granting tenure. Formal policies of the institution with regard to tenure and promotion should be available to each faculty member. The program director, or chairman, has a clear responsibility to acquaint faculty members with these procedures, to conduct regular reviews of the faculty member’s performance, and to offer advice and assistance regarding the achievement of goals determined for the individual. Opportunity must be given for a faculty member to meet the tenure criteria. The physical therapy faculty should meet the same criteria as other faculty members in the university. Faculty members familiar with the process will have greater opportunity for their application to be successful because they will have directed their activities over several years to meeting their institution’s tenure criteria. Tenured PT faculty members will credit the PT profession as a whole. Seemingly minor aspects
can be important. Physical therapy faculty members may prepare their curriculum vitae according to the guidelines of the APTA; however, this format usually is not acceptable in the academic setting.

Physical therapy educators, as members of the allied health profession, help form and often share the characteristics of that larger group. Robinson noted that allied health educators most often have a master’s degree, and in national comparisons, allied health educators tend to rank more heavily at the instructor and assistant professor levels, usually untenured ranks. Currently, many PT faculty members are pursuing higher degrees while maintaining their full-time faculty status. This may be disadvantageous to the untenured person, because all years of full-time employment count toward tenure review unless special arrangements can be made. A basic science educator who joins a faculty after receiving his doctorate has six years in which to prepare his review dossier, by grant writing and other appropriate activities. The PT faculty person who is teaching and pursuing a degree cannot take advantage of this period of preparation. Tenure review committees often consider most carefully an individual’s postdoctorate activities. Until recently, physical therapists usually have not had a doctoral degree when joining a faculty; many have had a master’s degree only. Program directors may need to negotiate for the faculty member’s years of study while employed full time not to be counted toward tenure review. Alternatively, the individual may select to remain at a rank that is not in the tenure track or to be employed part-time. The opportunity of being in a special professorial tenure track may encourage skilled clinicians to join PT faculties. These individuals otherwise may decide not to become academic educators because of the institution’s tenure criteria that emphasize research, publications, and grant activities.

Studies are needed to determine whether PT faculty members are evaluated in the same way as the faculty of other departments, whether PT faculty members and PT program directors rate criteria for promotion and tenure differently, and whether PT schools enforce time restrictions for tenure review when faculty members transfer from other schools. Another aspect worthy of investigation is the degree to which tenure policies and procedures vary between institutions of differing academic levels. Data on the success and failure rate of PT faculty in tenure review and the reasons for failure also would be useful to professional efforts to improve the numbers and status of PT educators.

Although the degree to which PT faculty members have been successful in gaining tenure is not known, in 1977, 37 percent were tenured. Robinson’s study of health science faculties showed a similar percentage; 30 percent of the responding 151 PT faculty members were tenured. This percentage was similar to that for nursing, occupational therapy, and medical technicians. Overall, Robinson demonstrated that before 1971 more men than women were tenured. Affirmative action laws may contribute to more equitable tenure success by women. He did note, however, that allied health educators had obtained “a respectable rate of tenure given their relative youth” and their qualifications. The slightly higher percentage of men compared with women who had achieved tenure on PT faculties as of 1977 (40% and 36%, respectively) may reflect inadequate socialization of women to the academic setting. Alternatively, it may reflect differences in career goals between men and women. As a member of six PT programs and two medical school basic science faculties, I have noted that untenured PT faculty members are generally less familiar and less concerned with tenure requirements than are untenured members of the basic science faculties despite the importance of these requirements.

A tenure appointment signifies recognition by peers of an individual’s high achievement and strong potential for continued performance and scholarly contributions. The status of the profession of physical therapy and of its programs also benefits from the achievement of tenure by PT faculty members.

SUMMARY

Academic tenure usually is awarded on achievement of a certain rank, after a prescribed pretenure period, provided certain criteria of individual performance are met and the institution is able to accept the financial implications of increasing the number of tenured faculty. Common criteria for the award of tenure are research accomplishment, grant activities, publication in refereed journals, and teaching excellence. Institutions vary in the emphasis and priority given to these items. Clinical faculty in a special track may not have to meet the same criteria as basic faculty but will be expected to demonstrate excellence in patient care, to be involved in clinical research, and to have acquired distinction in their clinical field.
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