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THE ROAD TO TENURE: OBSTACLES FOR THE MEDIA ADVISER

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ABSTRACT

Tenure has been the topic of various journal articles, but few have examined the process within specific disciplines. This study surveyed 136 advisers of campus radio and television stations to ascertain what obstacles to tenure were associated with this position. Respondents reported that 1) advising a media outlet takes time from teaching and research; 2) advising the station and producing programming is not highly valued by tenure committees; 3) tenure is essential to job security because students tend to push the envelope in on-air activities, and; 4) tenure is an archaic concept and they have no interest in pursuing it.

INTRODUCTION

Tenure has been a mainstay in America's academic institutions for nearly a hundred years. Much has been written about it, and it certainly has had its share of criticism, particularly through the 1990s (Finken, 1996). While arguments can be made for and against traditional tenure, it has afforded academic freedom to its recipients, at least to some degree, and most will agree that it offers some protection against arbitrary dismissal (Finken, pp. 4-7). According to Witherspoon and Knapp (1999, p. 341), "The award of tenure has become inextricably associated with the protection of academic freedom within institutions of higher education."

Much less attention, however, has been devoted to particular academic positions and the ease or difficulty with which those teachers obtain tenure. This study will focus on the case of the student media advisers (specifically advisers of campus television and radio outlets) and the unique challenges they face because of their additional responsibilities. The idea for this study was spawned from anecdotal observations at the 2004 Broadcast Education Association national convention. During a session, several media advisers grumbled that they were unable to get college administrators or tenure committees to recognize professional projects they produced, some of which were judged by peers, as worthy of consideration toward tenure. The advisers also noted that producing such work, in addition to advising stations operating full-time, did not allow much time for

publishing traditional academic research. Others said that they were long-time broadcasters themselves and had no interest in traditional academic research.

Still other media advisers claimed they feared for the security of their positions because college administrators and influential alumni are not always pleased with what is produced by students for the public airwaves. Some mentioned they were media advisers because they “loved it,” and would do it regardless of whether they were tenured or on tenure track.

The purposes of this study, then are: 1) to obtain descriptive statistics about television and radio advisers to use as a baseline for future studies; 2) to ascertain what obstacles, if any, advisers have faced in securing tenure, and; 3) to find out what media advisers think in general about the tenure process.

Literature Review

Diamond (1996, pp. 4-7) said that one of the most important steps in pursuing tenure is for the faculty member to understand what is expected, such as the procedures involved in interim reviews, submitting portfolios, etc., and the criteria and kind of documentation required. Because there are major differences among the disciplines, Diamond warned:

“These differences can be problematic when a faculty member comes up for review by colleagues from other disciplines, particularly if the work presented does not take the form of traditional research and publication.”

Several authors of promotion and tenure books mention ways that professional works of certain disciplines may be considered for tenure, but none mentions broadcasting, video or audio production. Herein lies a problem for media advisers. If there are no specific criteria, how are committee members, especially of other disciplines, to judge the weight and effectiveness of the work. The Institutional Priorities and Faculty Rewards project, coordinated at Syracuse University, suggested a rubric for documentation of directing a student production for theater faculty, that included presenting a video tape of the performance. This would seem to be an appropriate format for media advisers wishing to document professional work (Diamond, 1995).

Adams (2003) developed an Academic Assessment Index based on a survey of 109 university and college administrators. Books in the candidate’s field and refereed articles were ranked one and two, while service to the institution (where media advising generally falls) did not make the list, nor did professional presentations.

With respect to arbitrary dismissal, tenure and promotion books tend to concentrate on academic freedom, specifically with regard to professors speaking their minds in the classroom or in published works, but those books ignore the issue of students speaking their minds on radio and television stations (Finkin, 1996). It is often the student broadcaster’s exercise of free speech that can create problems for the media adviser.

The dilemma for those opting not to pursue tenure is that option is disappearing. In a 1999 master’s thesis, Chong (1999) sampled 123 schools and found that 91 percent indicated that they normally hire candidates on tenure track, while only 6 percent normally did not. Downes and Jirari (2000, p. 53) in a 2000 survey of job advertisements in the communication field found that the Ph.D. was the most specified credential (60 percent required it). They also found that “traditional tenure policies are embraced by a strong majority of academic institutions.” In 1998, Fedler et. al. (pp. 4-

5) ascertained that 76.6 percent of journalism and mass communication faculty whose specialty is radio/television possessed a Ph.D. Among those same faculty members, 23.4 percent had produced seven to ten refereed convention papers and 66 percent had published at least one journal article. The article did not distinguish media advisers from non-media advisers.

This study proposes to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the profile of the typical media adviser?

RQ2: What do media advisers consider to be major obstacles to obtaining tenure?

RQ3: What percent of media advisers are not on tenure track and why are they not pursuing tenure?

RQ4: What do media advisers think in general about tenure?

METHODOLOGY

In November, 2004, surveys were mailed to the 239 members of the Broadcast Education Association Student Media Advisers division. After a second mailing, 136 surveys were returned anonymously in a self-addressed, stamped envelope, for a response rate of 57 percent.

Thirteen of the questions were used to obtain demographic information about the respondents, as well as information about the type of media outlet advised, the format, number of major, type of institution (private or public) and the full-time enrollment at the institution. The next question was only for those pursuing or who have achieved tenure, and asked what obstacles there were, if any, to pursuing or achieving tenure. The following question, for those not pursuing tenure, asked why they were not pursuing. The third question of this group asked what benefits the person received for advising media. The final question was open-ended and asked the respondents for any other comments regarding tenure. The question was asked in a neutral manner so as not to encourage negative or positive responses.

RESULTS

Of the 136 respondents, 62 are tenured and another 27 are on tenure track. Of those not on tenure track, 22 have one-year contracts, 14 are on renewable contracts of varying years, and 11 marked other or no contract. Fifty-five advise television stations, 48 advise radio, and 28 advise both. The remaining five are streaming radio on the web. Fifty-nine respondents possess doctorates, 62 have their master's, and six are working with bachelor's degrees. Three respondents are pursuing master's degrees, five are pursuing Ph.D.'s, and only one is working without a degree. Seventy-eight percent of the advisers are male and 91 percent are white, but those are also areas for future studies. Perhaps of particular concern to media advisers is the effect tenure may have on salary. Fifty-seven percent of those tenured are making at least \$55,000 a year (N=62), while only 15 percent of those on tenure track (N=27) are earning that much. Nine percent of those not pursuing tenure (N=37) have a salary of \$55,000 or higher. In answer to RQ1, the profile of a typical media adviser is displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1: PROFILE OF THE STUDENT MEDIA ADVISER

MEAN AGE	46.3
MEAN YEARS OF MEDIA ADVISING (INSTITUTION)	8.1
MEAN YEARS OF MEDIA ADVISING (TOTAL)	51,343.28
MEAN SALARY	62
NUMBER OF TENURED FACULTY	27
NUMBER ON TENURE TRACK	59
NUMBER WITH PH.D.	67
NUMBER WITH MASTER'S	9
NUMBER WITH BACHELOR'S	1
NUMBER WITH NO DEGREE	52
NUMBER ADVISING RADIO	55
NUMBER ADVISING TELEVISION	29
NUMBER ADVISING BOTH	91
PERCENTAGE WHO ARE WHITE	77
PERCENTAGE WHO ARE MALE	

N=136

In response to RQ2, among those pursuing or those who have achieved tenure, about 55 percent said that one of the obstacles to tenure was the time it takes away from research. Almost 50 percent said it takes time away from teaching, more than 30 percent said tenure was not valued by the institution and nearly 16 percent said tenure was not valued by the department. Nearly 16 percent also reported no obstacles to obtaining tenure. Respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer, therefore the percentages total more than 100. Precise results are indicated in Table 2.

TABLE 2: OBSTACLES TO TENURE

TAKES TIME FROM RESEARCH	54.7%
TAKES TIME FROM TEACHING	49.5
NOT VALUED BY INSTITUTION	30.5
NOT VALUED BY DEPARTMENT	15.8
NO OBSTACLES	15.8

N=136

The answer to RQ3 is that 47 of the 136 respondents are not pursuing tenure, or 34.5 percent. The top reason for not pursuing tenure is it is not offered at the institution, or the adviser was not eligible (48.8 percent). Twenty-two percent said it was not advantageous to pursue tenure, 22 percent said they did not have the time, and 19.5 percent said they had no interest in pursuing tenure. Respondents were allowed to supply more than one answer. No one offered other reasons for not pursuing. Results

are reported in Table 3.

TABLE 3: REASONS FOR NOT PURSUING TENURE

NOT ELIGIBLE/NOT OFFERED	48.9%
NOT ADVANTAGEOUS	23.4
NO TIME	23.4
NOT INTERESTED	19.1
NOT ENCOURAGED BY ADMINIS- TRATION	12.8

N=47

The open-ended comments in response to RQ4 about the tenure process in general seemed to fall into four categories and perhaps provide the most salient information. One of the chief concerns to surface was how student content and ability in broadcasts reflected on the adviser in the eyes of administration or tenure committees. A 37-year-old male, who is on tenure track and adviser of a radio station, claimed that:

As a service responsibility, the station is a negative on my record. I get blamed for song selection, news stories that people don't like or sports coverage that isn't perfect. It's no fun to have your job threatened by those in power for the actions of student volunteers.

A 57-year-old tenured male adviser of both radio and television for 28 years pointed out that:

Often it is the junior faculty members that are assigned to be faculty advisers of campus media and those faculty don't have stature to demand the needed funds or to be an advocate of students who are prone to numerous mistakes and bad judgments. This puts the junior faculty adviser in a most precarious position when dealing with the process for tenure.

It is perhaps important to note that all of the advisers who had issues with content were either radio advisers or advisers of both radio and television.

The second area of concern about tenure had to do with the workload associated with media advising. Because of the nature of programming radio and television stations, much of the supervising occurs in the evenings or on weekends. If the station operates without interruption, managing it can become a full-time job in itself. A 57-year-old male on continuous one-year appointments said this about managing both a radio and television facility:

There is more work than there are hours in a day and I feel constantly swamped and almost overwhelmed. It's only in the relationship with the students and watching them benefit from my three decades of experience as a professional broadcaster that I find satisfaction. Even though there is no tenure, most of my co-workers have been here 15-25 years. Tenure would be nice but I don't see it happening at this institution.

The above-mentioned respondent has been an adviser for only one year. A 51-year-

old male who was on tenure track and is advising a television station said the relationship between pursuing tenure and advising media is dichotomous:

Tenure is a system that rewards faculty for pulling away from involvement with students. This is counter to the position of media advising. I was glad to be offered the chance to “withdraw” from tenure consideration, even though my new status is limited in terms of compensation and promotion.

A 41-year-old male adviser of a radio and a television station added:

The tenure seeker is required to gather a mountain of paperwork and attend numerous meetings, that takes time from teaching and research, not to mention student advising....In my view, tenure is too much extra work and politics for too little benefit. To qualify this, let me say that I am working under a renewable, non-tenure-track contract, so my opinion is based on watching co-workers navigate the tenure process.

Others have been able to navigate the process despite the obstacles, like this 40-year-old tenured male who advises a radio outlet:

I’ve performed many service projects for the university and have delivered papers and panels at many conferences. Advising/running the radio station is time consuming and can affect your performance in research and teaching. Between my Ph.D. and professional background in radio, I try to keep current with research and producing/managing the campus station. University and other faculty don’t always realize the work involved with a FCC station.

There is a third group of respondents who seem to believe the institution does not value their media advising or does not put it into proper perspective. A 51-year-old male, tenured adviser who has been advising a radio station for 20 years said:

I found it strange that my classroom teaching was the overwhelming focus for tenure and promotion and not advising the radio station that is half my job description. It was frustrating that one half of my job was discounted. I achieved tenure and promotion to full professor because I am a “superior” teacher according to my evaluations, but I think I do a better job managing the radio station.

A 45-year-old female adviser of online radio added:

Our department is unable to convince college tenure committees that electronic media/journalism is similar to art in that a show or script produced and aired by faculty should count as scholarly research.

Others offered solutions to the problem of undervalued works. Two respondents mentioned their institutions offered two tracks to tenure—one academic and one professional—with obviously different criteria. A 44-year-old tenured female adviser of a television station offered another solution:

Dante forgot to mention it! An organizational statement re: degree, appropriate service, and scholarship, similar to the College Art Association, would be helpful. All of my production work is considered service (I’d like to see other faculty try it!) or selected by the marketplace but not peers. Something which states that work of this nature is particular to the area of the discipline would help the pursuit of tenure tremendously.

There is a fourth category of media advisers that places little or no value in the tenure process. Only four participants in the survey responded in this manner, and their comments were terse. Interestingly, three of the comments came from professors with tenure. A 51-year-old male who advises radio and television said, “Realistically, tenure is a pretty archaic concept in today’s world.” A 54-year-old male adviser of both media commented, “It’s a game we have to play and the rules keep changing. Glad I got it so I can concentrate on my teaching and other interests.” A 45-year-old male television adviser said, “Outdated. Silly. I’d rather have a long-term, guaranteed contract. Writing articles for obscure journals that no one reads is ridiculous.” A 44-year-old male radio adviser who is untenured and on permanent appointment added, “Employees should prove value year to year without any crutch to fall back on.”

DISCUSSION

The 136 respondents to this survey were predominantly white and male, which may be an area for discussion in another study. The results cannot be generalized to include a population of all media advisers because only those who are members of the BEA media advisers division were sent surveys. Nonetheless, those surveyed reported obstacles to tenure that are uniquely associated with faculty who advise or manage campus radio and television.

There is a sense of a disconnection between the value media advisers place on extra-curricular work, such as video productions, and the value administrators or tenure committees place on that work. There are others who seem to believe there is simply not enough time to dedicate to research and other scholarly activities while trying to run a radio or television station. At the same time, many of these advisers believe tenure is essential toward security in a position where students making bad decisions can cost advisers their jobs. Note that this is self-reporting, so there was no evidence of how many, if any, had lost jobs through such arbitrary dismissal, but the perception is there.

Future studies may even indicate that some of these perceptions are unfounded. Perhaps a study of administrators or tenure committees might reveal a different perspective of what is valued for tenure and promotion. Leigh reported in 1988 (pp.67-71) that:

More than 90 percent of journalism and mass communication schools say they accept creative activities, such as the production of television programs, in tenure decisions, according to a national survey.

It would be interesting to know if that still holds true today, and to what degree those activities are valued. Leigh also reported that 44 percent of administrators surveyed had “encountered problems in tenure decisions as a result of different interpretations of acceptable criteria (Leigh, 1988, p. 70).”

Several respondents reported they believed it was vital that administrators had discrete, written tenure guidelines for media advisers, and that these were available to faculty to prepare appropriately for tenure review. The other unknown is whether the obstacles to tenure are more serious for media advisers than other faculty members, or whether there are other disciplines that face other unique obstacles. This study should be seen as an inchoate that could spawn research in several other directions.

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