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CASE STUDY 4A: ALEX HERNANDEZ

RESEARCH INSTITUTION VERSION

At the second- and fourth-year reviews of a tenure track faculty member in human development, the department chair, Dr. Lawrence Williams, delivered specific, significant criticism.

The second-year review letter for Dr. Alex Hernandez began with a reminder of the tenure standards: "Successful candidates must be judged excellent as either researchers or teachers and, at a minimum, very good in the alternate category.... Participation in department committees and minimal university service are expected." After advising the candidate to continue his currently excellent teaching and appropriate level of college and university service, Dr. Williams wrote:

"The tenured members of the department recommend that you cease focusing on journalistic essays. Popularizing research findings of others for general publications such as The Chronicle of Higher Education and the newsletter of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is fine service to the profession but unlikely to help you secure future funding and to impact the design of policy-oriented research. We hired you to work on national nutrition policy and outcomes and expect you to publish results in peer-reviewed journals. We urge you to concentrate on publishing your graduate work on diabetes interventions funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and to make progress on research that is not drawn from your dissertation."

At the fourth-year review, Dr. Hernandez was informed that the department valued him as an excellent teacher and recognized that his contribution to the public health campaign against diabetes had brought national attention to the university. However, the faculty lacked confidence that he would be able to publish sufficiently in peer-reviewed journals if he continued all of his "public intellectual" activity. No one had received tenure in the department in the past five years with fewer than three articles in peer-reviewed journals. All successful candidates presented proof of an ongoing research agenda. Two months after receiving his evaluation letter from the chair, Dr. Hernandez announced that he had taken a position at CSPI.

CASE STUDY 4A: ALEX HERNANDEZ RESEARCH INSTITUTION VERSION

Questions for discussion

- Would you evaluate the outcome in this tenure case as desirable or undesirable? Why?
- How do you assess the feedback the chair gave to Dr. Hernandez?
- What options did Dr. Hernandez have once he received his fourth-year review letter?



CASE STUDY 4B: ALLISON GORMAN

RESEARCH INSTITUTION VERSION

NOTES:

The year after Dr. Hernandez's fourth-year review, Dr. Allison Gorman received her second-year review from Dr. Williams. In the paragraph on research, she was praised for the acceptance of a major article based on her dissertation and encouraged to start thinking ahead to publications based on research undertaken after the completion of her dissertation. Two possible sources of funding for her new research project were identified. In the paragraph on teaching, she was urged to seek assistance from the Teaching and Learning Center. Students repeatedly complained that she spoke too fast, addressed the blackboard more than them, and seemed impatient with their questions during her office hours. In the paragraph on service, Dr. Williams encouraged her to join more department committees and engage in at least one university service project.

Between her second and fourth years, Dr. Gorman suffered a number of personal setbacks. She lost her mother unexpectedly and went through a messy divorce. Yet she did not request a leave of absence and continued with her faculty duties. She expanded her office hours for students and frequently visited the Teaching and Learning Center for help. Unfortunately, her teaching evaluations did not improve significantly. Another article based on her dissertation was accepted for publication, but her research agenda stalled as she waited for news on federal funding. In addition, she administered a lecture series and organized a national conference on campus.

Dr. Gorman's fourth-year review was written by a new chair, Dr. Georgia Rassiguier, who wanted to be encouraging:

"We understand that you have experienced difficult personal circumstances over the past two years and admire your determination to soldier on. The tenured members of the department congratulate you on two peer-reviewed publications based on your dissertation. As you know, in our field a book is not required to obtain tenure, but we do expect substantive publications, some of which should be based on research initiated after the dissertation.

"We are impressed with the amount of time you have spent using the resources of the Teaching and Learning Center and realize that you continue to go through a transitional period in managing advanced classes. We have noted that you have developed slides in order to clarify your lectures and that students no longer complain that you are impatient during office hours. If you continue to make use of the services available to faculty through the Teaching and Learning Center, you should be able to improve your evaluations.

"It's clear that you have already found your service niche in the department. Your administration of the lecture series and organization of a national conference on campus have helped to call attention to the high quality of our department and graduate students. It is a pleasure to have you as a colleague.

"Overall, the tenured members of the department are confident that you are making progress toward meeting our standards for tenure."

When Dr. Gorman came up for tenure two years later, she was voted down on the department level. She had placed one article based on her post-dissertation project on prosthesis funding and had no additional articles in circulation. Although three students majoring in the field requested that she serve on their senior research committees and took several of her classes, many students continued to complain that she jammed too much into lectures and mumbled. The department assessed her research as very good, her teaching as good, and her service as fully meeting expectations.

CASE STUDY 4B: ALLISON GORMAN RESEARCH INSTITUTION VERSION



Directions for small group work

Please break into small groups and assess the value of the fourth-year review letter received by Dr. Gorman. Take 15 minutes to suggest phrases and sentences that should be removed from the letter and statements that should have been made. You might ask yourselves:

- How did the tone and content of the chair's fourth-year letter change from Dr. Hernandez to Dr. Gorman?
- If you were Dr. Gorman, what would you have learned from the fourth-year letter?
- What should Dr. Gorman have been told about research expectations?
- What types of assistance can your institution offer a tenure-track candidate who is struggling to improve as a teacher?

Questions for discussion

- What are some of the obstacles to candid evaluation of tenure candidates?
- Does your institution take early reviews seriously?
- Do the early reviews become part of the tenure file that goes up to the P&T committee?
- What can departments do to turn a sense of failure into an opportunity for transition?
- How can institutions monitor whether candidates in varied departments are receiving adequate feedback and constructive criticism?
- How does an institution establish a culture of candor so that people who write honest reviews are not perceived negatively?
- What are some of the ways that reviewers "damn with faint praise" because they do not want to say anything negative?

CASE STUDY 4B: ALLISON GORMAN RESEARCH INSTITUTION VERSION

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Sample Gorman evaluation letter

What suggestions did you make for the fourth-year review letter for Dr. Allison Gorman? Here's one example of a better communication about the progress she is making toward being a viable candidate for tenure.

"Dear Allison,

"The senior members of the department have asked that I convey to you our recognition of the improvement you have shown over the past two years and our assessment of where you need to concentrate your efforts in preparation for being considered for tenure.

"Our tenure standards state: 'Successful candidates must be judged excellent as either researchers or teachers and, at a minimum, very good in the alternate category.' With regard to research, we congratulate you on the publication of one article and the acceptance of another based on your dissertation. You should now concentrate on publishing results based on your inquiries into prosthesis funding and into how children are affected by chronic mobility impairment in adult providers. As you know, in our field a book is not required to obtain tenure, but we do expect significant publications. For close to a decade now, candidates judged excellent in research submitted between three and eight accepted articles, including at least two based on post-dissertation research. There is no magic number because the evaluation process takes into account the significance and range of research and the demonstrated potential for ongoing productivity. Although external funding is an important indicator of future output, it is not required to receive tenure.

"With regard to teaching, we note that you have developed excellent slides in order to clarify your lectures and that students no longer complain that you are impatient during office hours. However, your evaluations continue to fall below the mean, particularly because of persistent complaints about the volume of material and difficulty hearing you. Frankly, we are concerned about declining enrollment in your elective seminars for majors. Although you have clearly made use of the resources of the Teaching and Learning Center, we specifically recommend that you take advantage of the offer of classroom visitations by colleagues in other departments who will not be involved in your evaluation process. Their coaching and observations can be very helpful.

"With regard to service, we are very appreciative of your administration of the lecture series, contribution to department committees, and successful on-campus hosting of a national conference for academics and government researchers. Because you have exceeded the service expectations mapped out in your second-year letter, for the next two years we ask only that you continue to serve on the awards committee.

"Allison, it is a pleasure to have you as a colleague. The senior members of the department and I continue to be available to assist you in any way possible to meet the university's expectations for tenure. If you are interested, I would be happy to meet with you to work out an action plan for the steps you should take this semester and over the summer."



NOTES:

TAKEAWAYS

RESEARCH INSTITUTION VERSION

Case study 4

- Departments should use early evaluations to provide feedback so that tenure decisions are not a surprise.
- Candidates should receive candid periodic evaluations of their progress in meeting the requirements for tenure.
- Evaluations should offer practical guidance for future efforts to meet the requirements without promises or guarantees that the institution may not be able to honor.
- Evaluations should be written in plain English.
- Evaluations should offer constructive criticism outlining any potential areas for improvement.