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Editorial: Surviving the Promotion and Tenure Process

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Professional evaluation of our work is important whether it comes from personal reflection and satisfaction, from our students, or from our peers. This is part of the feedback that helps us structure our professional decisions. The promotion and tenure process for university and college faculty is one formal manifestation of evaluation our peers. There are many things that make being a faculty member worthwhile–contributing to the knowledge base of our field, working with our students, interaction with colleagues, and developing a sense of accomplishment are some. Kept in the proper perspective, the promotion and tenure review process allows us to have evaluation from our peers and to have professional advancement based on appropriate and excellent performance. The 1994 report of the Joint Policy Board for Mathematics (JPBM) addresses some issues of professional recognition and rewards in the mathematical sciences. Although the report does not specifically address these issues for mathematics educators there is much in the report to guide our concerns and define issues we should address.

Over the years, I have had a lot of involvement in the promotion process. This has taken many forms. First, I went through the process myself. Second, as a department head, I had a responsibility to assist with the promotions of many faculty members. Third, as I gained some visibility in the field I have been asked to provide letters of evaluation for faculty at many institutions other than my own to assist with recommendations for promotion. Fourth, one time in 26 years, I was allowed to serve on a college promotion review committee.

Promotion and tenure review processes are a fact of academic life. Assuming many of the readers of this journal are facing such decisions or hoping to (those who have already been promoted and tenured probably do not read editorials), the remarks here are intended as counsel for dealing with reality rather than changing the system. In an ideal world the opportunity to present one's record to colleagues should facilitate professional growth and accomplishment. Unfortunately, in the real world pathologies in the system can make the process stressful, debilitating, confrontational, and even adversarial.

There are variations in the promotion process across different universities and colleges, but they have more commonalties than differences (JPBM, 1994). At each institution there is some mechanism for presenting one's professional record. That mechanism always involves a committee of peers (i.e., faculty who have already received promotion and tenure) and it usually involves administrative review. The criteria for promotion are set by the institution and involve guidelines excellence in scholarship, teaching, and service. Tenure criteria usually overlap promotion criteria but have an additional item that is some version of "demonstration of continued need for one's services." Even persons now in doctoral study and hoping to join a faculty in the future have some sense of the expectations for each of these areas. So what could be a problem with the process?

First, even though one is employed as a faculty member with expectations for doing well in research, teaching, professional service, and sometimes other responsibilities, it is clear that traditional research performance measured through a portfolio of refereed journal articles is essentially a necessary and sufficient condition for promotion and tenure. The JPBM Report (1994) indicates that "a reward structure to encompasses the full array of faculty activity required to fulfill departmental and institutional missions has been implemented in only a small number of departments" (p. 27). They found an evolution during the past decade that shows departments that traditionally emphasized teaching roles placing more emphasis on research and scholarship and there has been an increased emphasis on teaching roles at universities that traditionally emphasized their research roles (p. 8). The institutional rhetoric may say otherwise but the practices generally confirm the primacy of research reported in journal articles. Any alternative case requires extraordinary measures of support. For example, in mathematics education, research activity is often documented in presentation and reporting to the Special Interest Group in the Psychology of Mathematics and publishing in their proceedings. This reporting, however, is not accepted on the same level as reporting in a refereed journal. Another example is that a young faculty member may be encouraged to devote time to proposal writing for outside funding. Even a successful record of obtaining grants may not be accepted as criteria for research performance.

Second, the rhetoric at most institutions will also emphasize excellence in teaching. Evidence of excellence in teaching must be presented, but documentation is difficult and it is nearly impossible to make the case for promotion based primarily on excellence in teaching. Further, at many places, scholarly productivity in teaching means writing articles about teaching for refereed journals. Materials (e.g. articles, books, computer programs, videos, multimedia) provide the tangible record.

Third, there is a continuous problem of communicating the nature of scholarly productivity in mathematics education to our peers who are not in mathematics education (but who serve on review committees). This is as much a problem whether our peers are generalists in education, specialists in some other area of education, or in some other field. It is particularly a problem when our peers are in mathematics since many mathematics educators are housed in mathematics departments and judged by colleagues who are not always supportive of work in mathematics education.

Sadly, the promotion and tenure review process can be difficult and impersonal while it is intended to be impartial. It often takes most of a year to run its course, the committees are usually anonymous, and candidates seldom have any opportunity for input into the process other than by formal written procedures. The JPBM Report (1994) offers six guiding principles to assist faculty in the mathematical sciences to work on each institution's definition of the reward structure (pp. 28-38).

Anticipating the process of promotion and tenure review is one aspect of career planning and is best viewed in that light. The supporting evidence in a file or dossier does not come together just in the months before it is submitted but rather it is accumulated and assessed from the start of one's appointment. If the items of evidence for a dossier are

prepared and accumulated continuously, a lot of the unnecessary pressure of the promotion year can be alleviated. Some institutions will have mentors or administrators who facilitate and assist in this long-term preparation. If such assistance is not provided, a young faculty member is well advised to informally seek out mentors.

Another advantage of long term planning is that it provides a framework for deciding whether assignments and activities might add to the evidence in support of promotion. One might still decide to follow an activity of interest for some other reason, but at least the decision is made within a framework.

Generally, the promotion and tenure process serves the university and its faculty well. It continues to be driven by faculty input and it facilitates one's career development. It is our "quality control" mechanism and despite anxiety for meeting the requirements and procedures, most of us would not want it any other way.
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Joint Policy Board for Mathematics. (1994). Recognition and Rewards in the Mathematical Sciences. Report of the Committee on Professional Recognitions and Rewards. Providence, RI: American Mathematics Society.