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How many faculty (by college) have been denied tenure this year?

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How many faculty (by college) have been denied tenure this year? How many turned down for promotion? At which level (department, dean, or provost) have these decisions been made. How do all these numbers compare with the past two years?

Submitted by: Annette Laing

3/10/2004

Question:

How many faculty (by college) have been denied tenure this year? How many turned down for promotion? At which level (department, dean, or provost) have these decisions been made. How do all these numbers compare with the past two years?

Rationale:

There is broad concern that tenure and promotion standards have clearly been ratcheted up, despite administrators' claims to the contrary. We need to know the broad impact of these decisions on the faculty.

Senate Response:

3/25/2004: Cyr (CLASS) reported that the second information request was submitted by Laing (CLASS), asking for the numbers on denials of tenure and promotion applications. A handout was provided to all present, and the response to the information request was deferred to Provost Vandegrift.

Vaughn Vandegrift (Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs) stated that questions have come up in the past few years concerning the number of tenure and promotion applications and their disposition. A recent policy change requires that applicants that are denied at the college must be passed through the system unless
they specifically state otherwise, which means it is hard to go back too many years owing to insufficient data.

There were 24 applicants for tenure in 2002-2003. Twenty were recommended by department committees, 20 by department chairs, 21 were recommended by college committees, and 21 were recommended by deans. The Provost disagreed with a dean's recommendation and reversed that recommendation so the original 20 were recommended for tenure.

This year there were 29 applicants. Twenty-six were affirmed by department committees for a reduction of three, 26 were recommended by department chairs, and 24 were recommended by college committees.

Twenty-two of those 24 were recommended by deans and all 22 were recommended at the institutional level. There was a request for a breakdown by college, but because there are so few tenure recommendations that come forward that do not ultimately receive tenure, to do so would be identifying individuals.

Laing (CLASS) stated that the guiding philosophy of the current administration appears to be from the top down, with emphasis on the proper 'chain of command'. Given that, she wondered what it means when someone is turned down by a college dean. It was her understanding that administrators are evaluated, in part, according to their loyalty, which makes it difficult to know exactly who is turning applicants down and raises concerns when the institution steps in to turn people down more than they are stepping in to rectify injustices done at lower levels. This is particularly troublesome because outside the department, those making decisions are often not familiar with the requirements of a discipline. She stressed the catastrophic effect this is having on morale, which is counterproductive.

Provost Vandegrift responded that he had never taken a loyalty oath, nor does he believe he has used the term “chain of command”. Regarding the logistics of decision making, he referenced two personnel actions this year. One had letters and a petition from faculty that reiterate Laing’s feelings: someone who is making a recommendation either has no right to make that recommendation because the person is not in the discipline or the recommendation is not consistent with the faculty recommendation. The second personnel action had letters and a petition from faculty that says the faculty in a department have made an erroneous recommendation and it is the obligation of the Provost to overturn and countermand that faculty recommendation. The point is that there will be disagreement between the recommending groups. He recalled that during his interview for this position, he was asked in an open forum if he was the Provost at Georgia Southern and was to receive a recommendation for tenure, and if there had
been differences in the recommending authorities, what would he do? He answered at that time that in his experience, when there is a difference of opinion along the way, unless there was an obvious injustice like discrimination, it would be his inclination to decide on the part of the institution and say no. He further noted that when he has not recommended for tenure, he was never the first of the recommending groups to do so. Laing (CLASS) argued that there is widespread perception that the deans will not countermand the Provost and, with respect to a particular case she had in mind, only the Provost and Dean thought that this person should not have tenure.

Provost Vandegrift was not convinced this was accurate, but in any event, the data shows that last year he did countermand a dean’s recommendation. He looks at whether there have been reasonably held differences of opinion along the way and how those stack up with respect to the institutional decision he has to make.

Rice (COST) agreed that while there can be fundamental differences of opinion, she understood Laing’s (CLASS) concern about faculty demoralization. Faculty morale suffers the most when tremendous amounts of time are invested by different groups of faculty in evaluating their peers, resulting in either unanimous or overwhelmingly positive support for a candidate only to have it overturned at the dean’s level. Under those circumstances, three bodies have been overturned: the department, the department chair, and the college committee. Faculty involved in the process at all of those levels question why they invest so much time in the process if their recommendations do not matter.

Additionally, the actual counts for and against by the groups that do the evaluations do not make it to the Provost’s level. Ideally, when there is a situation where recommendations are positive all the way up to the dean’s level and then overturned, the Provost should ask for the counts and do a very close examination of what went wrong in the process, i.e., why three groups have overwhelmingly supported a candidate and one person has acted in vast difference to the recommendations of those three groups.

Provost Vandegrift queried that, in this year’s data, the reduction from 26 to 24 at the dean’s level are more destructive to faculty morale than the previous two or the three that were initial?

Rice (COST) agreed and Cyr (CLASS) noted that those are the ones he would look at first because they look most questionable. Rice (COST) reiterated that the Provost should take a very hard look at those two. Provost Vandegrift assured the Senate that he did, and noted that there is no hidden agenda. Over the last two years, there were 45
recommendations for tenure, and 42 were affirmed. The goal is to make that 100%, recognizing that we are talking about people’s lives and careers.

Laing (CLASS) pointed out a larger issue behind this discussion: nobody has a clue what the standards are except that they are going up at the time when resources are going down. There is an effort to raise the standards without saying that we are raising the standards.

Krug (CLASS) wondered what criteria would constitute an ‘institutional perspective’ that the college committee representing various departments might not have? The Provost clarified that when he said ‘institutional perspective’ he meant that he and the President alone have the responsibility to evaluate and look at every tenure decision that takes place at the university; they have reviewed every one of the 45 applicants. No one else has. It gives them a different context and they are evaluating within that context. Krug (CLASS) asked what that context would be?

Provost Vandegrift responded “The context of knowing all 45 dossiers are that are being recommended for tenure, as opposed to knowing only the context of a discipline or a college. It’s just different.”

Laing (CLASS) asked if that meant they were just comparing numbers? The Provost responded that he was not talking about numbers or even comparing people. He adjudicates every tenure case on its own merits, but since he reads so many dossiers a year, his perspective is different.

Krug (CLASS) appreciated the fact that the Provost read 45 dossiers, but also appreciates the fact that the way a person delivers a course, article or other research differs among the disciplines. Since no one discipline is any better than any other, why would the people who are acquainted with the discipline, with all respect to the Provost and Dr. Grube, not know more about that discipline?

Provost Vandegrift reiterated that when a question is raised, he has to bring the institution in and ask whether those non-recommendations should be changed to a positive recommendation, and that every tenure case is unique. He and the deans are sensitive to what Laing (CLASS) and Krug (CLASS) have said about faculty morale. He believes we should hire the best faculty we can find, tell them what they need to be doing, as a university, to be successful and support them so that they can be. It is his hope that faculty morale is not really affected negatively by this.

Robinson (CLASS) asked what measures the Provost was taking to communicate back down the line why that process is broken in each of those specific cases where a
decision was overturned after department or college support was provided. The Provost responded that if the process is broken it should be fixed. The Senate took the promotion and tenure criteria and clearly articulated from a university-wide viewpoint what the expectations are for all faculty personnel decisions. While that clarification took place at a university-wide level, it may not have made it down to all departments. The deans have been informed of their responsibility to ensure that clarification exists at the department level.

Krug (CLASS) noted that the tenure guidelines on pages 26-27 of the 2003-2004 Faculty Handbook do not give criteria for tenure. The Provost said that they give institution-wide criteria for tenure which are to be implemented at the department level. Krug (CLASS) disagreed. The Provost referred her to page 23, Criteria for All Types of Faculty Evaluation: “The criteria described below, along with the Faculty Attributes in Section 204, apply to all types of faculty evaluation. . . .” He wondered if Krug (CLASS) had not just identified a problem in that new faculty were not being referred to this section of the handbook.

Godfrey Gibbison (COBA) asked if it was safe to assume that when somebody is denied tenure or promotion, there is a letter that goes back which says exactly why they are not promoted or tenured?

Provost Vandegrift provided that in the case of promotion an explanation of what additional work might be required was provided either in a letter or by the dean. In the case of tenure, the Board of Regents' policy is that no written reason for non-recommendation be provided. However, he has told the deans and the department chairs that they can and should characterize verbally what the deficiencies were that led to the non-tenure recommendation. Verbally, he thinks there should be a clear indication of what the issues are, and if that is not the case those individuals can write to him and he will make sure it becomes clear.

Laing (CLASS) reiterated that faculty do not know what the standards are, nor how to meet them. As the goal posts shift, and the deans and Provost articulate on occasion what is expected, that information filters through only to discover that by next year it has changed again. Therefore, regardless of what the Provost says at this point, people are coming away feeling as confused and angry as ever. The Provost expressed his sincere hope that that was not the case, and that where decisions have been made people generally understand, and may not accept, but do understand the reasons.