Introduction to University: Lecture Seven

A Professor's Career

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Being a professor is, above all, to engage in play. It's like being a musician, an artist, a comedian or an athlete. Agonistic and ludic. It involves voluntarily assuming the challenge of living up to standards of excellence and one does it for fun. But being a professor is also a job and a career. It comes with steady pay, job protections and access to resources. It also involves tedious or draining responsibilities. Now, it's a good thing being a professor is a steady well-paying job, for it would not be easy to engage the world as an intellectual only in one's leisure time and without institutional support. Those people who manage to participate in discussions, to read and write papers and books, and otherwise to engage in the life of the mind outside universities and apart from remuneration should command every professor's admiration.

Being a professor is a steady job for most professors, but not for all. For many, being a professor is a gig job. Some professors, that is, get paid for teaching, and only for teaching, on a per-course basis. They are hired by universities on four- or eight-month contracts to teach single courses, courses they haven't created or chosen but that have been assigned to them. Professors who teach for pay on a per-course basis are called part-time instructors or contingent or adjunct professors ("adjunct," though, has different meanings in different contexts).

Some universities have not just regular professors, who engage in research, teaching and service, but teaching-stream professors, who are not professionally obligated to do research. Professors in the teaching stream might each year have to teach twice or three times as many courses or students as regular professors do, and have, as well, to serve the university in contractually specified ways. Since they have no time to be engaging in research, they cannot in their teaching be helping as well as they could to initiate students into the life of the mind. A university that has a teaching-professor stream is not a university fully committed to its academic mission.

I would that the professoriate were expanding, so that more competent intellectuals who wish to serve their muse are able to do so. Unfortunately, the professoriate is contracting. To add to this sad state of affairs, many universities hire new professors not on academic grounds but because of their race, sex, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability status. More talented academics can lose to less talented ones in the competition for scarce jobs. A university that took its academic mission seriously would hire only according to academic ability and academic promise.

So, then, what goes into a professor's job and what is the shape of a professor's career?

As I described in the second lecture in this series, the three parts of a professor's undertaking are research, teaching and service. Professors pursue research, interpretation, inquiry or scholarship; they help apprentice intellectuals acquire the skills, knowledge and attitudes useful to hard thought; and they help to promote intellectual life within and beyond their home universities.

Most significant of these three for a professor's career within the university as an institution is research, just in that a professor who is publishing good articles or books is unlikely to be denied tenure or promotion even if his or her teaching or service is substandard. Good teaching, for its part, can save a professor who is an unproductive or poor researcher, although, given the nature of university teaching, it's hard to conceive of a good teacher who isn't meaningfully engaged in research. A record of service, on the other hand, no matter how exemplary, will not by itself gain for an unproductive or middling researcher who can't teach either tenure or promotion.

Professors are counselled that research and teaching should each consume about 40% of their professional time, energy and emotional commitment, while service should consume only about 20%. But a professor might shift those percentages to play to his or her strengths. Again, most important are research and teaching, but a professor who wishes someday to become an academic administrator might spend much of his time in service, serving on senate committees, say, or as a member of the faculty union's executive.

Typically, professors are evaluated by their colleagues four or five times during their careers. Their colleagues will evaluate their research, teaching and service with an eye toward deciding about hiring, tenure or promotion.

The first evaluation occurs before a scholar is hired as a professor. Candidates for a professorship must make a case to the hiring committee that they are excellent researchers and teachers and that they will assume without fuss, and then successfully discharge, the burdens of service.

The second evaluation occurs three years after they have joined a university on the tenure track. Scholars hired on the tenure track are hired on a five-year probationary contract. During their third year they apply for renewal of their probationary contract. Renewal is decided by the department and the dean of their faculty. It consists in submitting a short dossier. Renewal does not involve sending the dossier to professors outside the applicant's university.

If a professor on a probationary contract is renewed, then, during their fifth probationary year, he or she will apply for tenure and, most often at the same time, for promotion. For tenure, a professor will compile a large dossier that the dean will send to three professors at other universities. The tenure materials the candidate submits to his or her department include both the dossier and the evaluations of it by the three external reviewers. These materials are considered first by the professor's department (or a subcommittee of it), then by the dean of their faculty, then by the academic vice-president and the tenure committee that he or she chairs, and then, finally, by the president of the university. (Tenure and promotion should, though, be the business only of the department in consultation with the dean. Officers and committees above the level of the dean are more trouble than they are worth and often make bad decisions.)

Tenure is forward-looking, in that it is granted to professors who the professor's colleagues think will continue to produce excellent research and will continue to teach well, and who will continue to serve the university at least adequately. Promotion is backward-looking in that it is a reward for the good research and good teaching that the professor has already done. Professors are promoted for what they have done and granted tenure in expectation of what they will do.

Having tenure means that one cannot be fired except for exceptional cause. (Or at least it should mean this. Recent cases, such as those of Frances Widdowson and Paul Viminitz, indicate that tenure might not be a strong protection anymore.) Supposedly, a tenured professor can be dismissed from his or her job only for incompetence (as a researcher or teacher), academic misconduct (repeated plagiarism, for instance), or some forms of non-academic misconduct (paying students to enrol in a course, for instance, so that the course won't be cancelled—I kid you not, this actually happened at a university I was once at).

The point of tenure is to protect the academic freedom and intellectual integrity of the professor. A tenured professor may hold unpopular views, either in their area of research or about anything else, without fearing loss of his or her job. He or she may teach in unorthodox ways. But the institution of tenure is only as good at protecting academic freedom as the culture of a university allows it to be. University administrators, sometimes egged on by mobs of professors or students, have been known to brush tenure aside to get rid of a professor they don't like. Faculty unions have been known to give academic freedom the cold shoulder in favour of social justice causes.

There are three ranks of professor. Beginning, untenured, professors are at the rank of Assistant Professor. This is just the name of the rank; it doesn't indicate that they assist anyone in anything. Usually, when a professor applies for tenure, he or she also applies for promotion to the rank of Associate Professor. (You may apply for promotion to Associate Professor either before or after you earn tenure, but it is standard to apply for it at the same time you apply for tenure.) The third rank is Professor, sometimes called Full Professor. A professor must be an Associate Professor for eight years before he or she can become a (Full) Professor. The fourth or fifth time a professor is evaluated for his or her research, teaching and service, then, is when he or she applies for promotion to (Full) Professor.

To recap: A scholar's research, teaching and service is evaluated first at hiring, second at renewal, third at tenure, fourth at promotion to Associate Professor, and fifth at promotion to Professor. (Tenure and promotion to Associate Professor are often folded into one.)

After a professor retires, if in the judgment of his or her colleagues, they have been an excellent professor, he or she may be named Emeritus or Emerita Professor by the university to honour their career. Or so is the standard account of the concept of emeriti professors. A better understanding is that the honour accrues to the university rather than to the professor. The university is honoured by the academic community when a professor is raised to emeritus status for its having supported and nurtured such a fine scholar.

Professors also submit annual reports to their departments and deans. The rigmarole around annual reports is more annoying than useful or difficult. At most universities, annual reports are

simply lists of publications or activities, and from a list nothing of significance can be discerned. (Only by reading an article, not by reading its title or noting the venue in which it appeared, can one judge that article's quality.) If the practice of submitting an annual report has any point at all, and I doubt it does, it is merely so that our colleagues will be able to help us if we've begun to fall from excellence into mediocrity.

It can and does happen that universities hire the wrong people or make bad decisions about tenure and promotion. Why do the processes of evaluation sometimes go wrong? One way they can go wrong is a result of the baleful tendency of some members of university communities to consider in their evaluations non-academic factors such as race, sex, ethnicity, cultural affiliation, disability, and sexual orientation. At a university serious about its academic mission, all academic decisions would be made on academic grounds only (until those grounds run out, if they ever do). Another way hiring and promotion go wrong is by counting the number of a professor's publications rather than assessing their quality. Some members of committees are keen on counting the publications or committees served on rather than reading the papers or seeing what good the committees have produced. Along with this, some members care whether a publication was peer-reviewed and whether it appeared in a prestigious journal. Sometimes a member of a committee will ask about some element of the candidate's history ("where was he this year and what did he do?"), as if anything other than the quality of the candidate's work should matter.

Things can go south when academic administrators above the level of the dean of the faculty want to get involved. Their concern will be with the reputation or brand of the university and the fit of the professor within their conception of their institution. (A recent case at Saint Mary's concerns a professor wrongly denied promotion by administrators who were above the decanal level.) Meddling by Human Resources causes similar problems. The decision makers should be the department members and only them, in consultation with the dean. The dean's role would be as advisor and critic. But that presupposes a university culture of criticism. Few universities have such a culture. Most instead feature hierarchical cultures in which lower levels, such as departments, petition upper levels, and seek to justify their requests or decisions by referring to instruments of administration such as university academic plans.

Administrators, unions and others prefer there to be clear and distinct criteria and that candidates be evaluated against clear and distinct criteria set down in documents. The preference for criteria (counting, objectivity) is part of the creeping professionalization of the academy. What should be in place, though, is the honest and full use of individual judgement by committee members. Each committee member should be concerned for quality only, quality understood by the member's own lights, however bright or idiosyncratically coloured those lights might be. When a candidate's work is simply put against a set of boxes to be checked, university life and the academic mission of the university are diminished.

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