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Brief 4: Department Chairs Discuss Post-Tenure Review

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NERCHE BRIEF

**New England Resource Center for Higher Education
January 2001**

The following Brief from the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) is a distillation of collaborative work of members of NERCHE's ongoing think tanks for administrators and faculty in the New England region. NERCHE Briefs emphasize policy implications and action agendas from the point of view of the people who tackle the most compelling issues in higher education in their daily work lives. With support from the Ford Foundation, NERCHE disseminates these pieces to a targeted audience of legislators, college and university presidents and system heads, and media contacts. The Briefs are designed to add critical information and essential voices to the policy decisions that leaders in higher education address.

Department Chairs Discuss Post-Tenure Review

Within any college and university, it is in the academic department where most of the work is accomplished in educating students and carrying out the institution's academic mission. Department chairs are at the front lines of policy implementation. At a recent meeting members of NERCHE's Department Chairs Think Tank weighed in on what they have learned from their experiences with post-tenure review (PTR) policies.

Post-tenure review is coming to an institution near you

At a growing number of institutions, particularly state institutions, tenured faculty undergo a periodic (5-7 years) review conducted by their peers and documented at the university level. The process itself is similar to tenure review, focusing on teaching, scholarship, and research. There are two major driving forces for post-tenure review: One is accountability to determine whether faculty members are contributing to the educational mission of their school or college. A possible, though rare, outcome of this kind of review is an action, such as the dismissal of a faculty member seen as unproductive. Another impetus is career development, including the identification of deficiencies as well as the creation of future professional goals and objectives. Unlike

an annual review PTR affords an opportunity to assist faculty members in developing their professional work in a way that is commensurate with the stage of their career. Outcomes of the review include affirmation of contributions to the institution, the formation of a career development plan that includes long- and short-term goals, and focused faculty development. The review can also be used to channel faculty into devoting more time to bolstering weak areas in their practice.

Where it comes from matters

Impetus for PTR often comes from state legislatures and boards concerned about accountability issues and wary that tenure can create conditions for “dead wood” faculty on campuses. The review process provides a mechanism to determine whether faculty members are fulfilling their roles. Used in this way, the post-tenure review is summative rather than formative and therefore may fail to take advantage of important opportunities for faculty development. The fact is that post-tenure review is not an effective method for eliminating dead wood. Only fifteen percent of cases using evidence from post-tenure reviews result in the discharge of a faculty member. There are already mechanisms in place—developed by professional associations and accreditation groups and included in union contracts—to deal with faculty who are not meeting job objectives. The process of termination is a complicated one that administrators are sometimes reluctant to initiate. As is true with many professions, there is a sense that the professionals—in this case, faculty—should make the first move. Both accountability and career development are lost in the resulting stalemate.

Make it work for everyone

The literature on organizational change emphasizes the importance of buy-in—a commitment to and a feeling of ownership of the policy—for those that the change affects. Without buy-in, change can produce resentment or defensiveness, neither of which generates a fruitful environment. If it is conceived and implemented in terms of faculty development, post-tenure review can be a productive experience for the individual and, in the end, the department and institution. Equally important is the question: Who will conduct the review? Department size varies, and it may be untenable

for a chair of a large department with many junior faculty to conduct post-tenure reviews. As with tenure processes, a committee of peers may be the appropriate structure to carry out the review. In any case a department must be willing to commit adequate resources for PTR. Post-tenure review must be framed in terms of institutional work and mission, as with anything that goes on in the educational enterprise. While there are good models of PTR policy, such as one being developed at the University of Hawaii, each institution must create a policy that reflects its context. Chairs offer a series of recommendations to guide institutions of higher education and their leaders in developing post-tenure review policies and procedures.

- Develop mechanisms to foster faculty buy-in, including faculty representation on PTR policy committees. Diffuse impressions that PTR is punitive.
- Invest time in carefully thinking through the development of the policy. Who will do it? How will departments be involved?
- Embed the reasons for PTR deeply in the mission of the institution and in the benefits that will accrue to students, departments, and the institution itself.
- Tie PTR into annual reviews. Make the annual review the first step toward improving practice.
- Provide resources such as faculty development funds, course release, and other opportunities for faculty to enhance their work. Build the costs of PTR into departmental budgets.
- Link PTR to strategic planning at the department level, because the department plays a pivotal role in faculty work.

- Develop mechanisms to ensure that PTR policies continue to evolve with institutional changes over time, such as changes in faculty, in mission, and in student demographics.
- Provide training and assistance to chairs to prepare them to evaluate senior faculty. Be aware that most chairs will return to the faculty and may find this role difficult.

Post-tenure review can revitalize faculty careers by helping them explore new avenues for their work or rekindle interests that were set aside at an earlier stage in his or her professional life. But the issue of post-tenure review is prickly and, unless faculty are part of the policy development, can result in political affrays that take the focus off of educational improvement and turn it to pitched battles between faculty and administration. With carefully planned and implemented policies, PTR can stimulate faculty to develop new ways to contribute to students' education while gaining professional satisfaction.

For more information about NERCHE Think Tanks and other programs, contact us at:

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