

THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

FACULTY

Most Professors Hate Post-Tenure Review. A Better Approach Might Look Like This.

By Audrey Williams June | FEBRUARY 11, 2018



Wayne Armstrong

Sandra Eaton (right) and Gareth Eaton (back right), both professors of chemistry and biochemistry at the U. of Denver, work with students in the lab. Under a new faculty-development policy, tenured professors at Denver can adjust their workloads over time to include more teaching, research, or service.

performance.

Lots of other colleges seemed to be doing it. The University of Denver wondered if it should, too.

Post-tenure review had an air of rigor to it. No slackers here! it suggests. Never mind that most professors hate it because it's time-consuming and has threatening if not punitive connotations. Annual reviews to determine merit raises had long been the norm at Denver, a private university. But surely something more could be done to spot problems and improve professors'

Denver's board members, and even some deans and professors, feared that not having a post-tenure protocol hurt its reputation. Discussion of the idea in the mainstream news media made the issue hard to ignore. The university wanted to avoid the perception, let alone the reality, of veteran professors resting on their laurels. But it also wanted to avoid alienating them.

A More Upbeat Approach to Post-Tenure Review

The University of Denver is instituting a program focused not on punitive measures but on helping professors develop their skills.

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So four years ago, the institution formed a faculty-led committee to determine what post-tenure review might look like. The consensus was to concentrate not on post-tenure review but on creating a different system to squelch poor performance. The number of the institution's 700 or so faculty whose work didn't meet acceptable standards, the thinking went, was too small to justify adopting a new universal system of evaluation. What was needed instead was systematic faculty development.

"Why create this huge policy where everyone has to jump through hoops to change the behavior of a few people who may not change their behavior in the end?" says Kate Willink, an associate professor of communication studies, and president of Denver's Faculty Senate. "For me, it was crystal clear from the

beginning that the punitive approach didn't make a whole bunch of sense in thinking about how you move faculty to a flourishing career over the course of their life."

Last May, the Faculty Senate finally approved new policies and procedures for faculty development. These give all faculty members three ways to develop or sharpen their skills. They can use peer-to-peer discussions to get various perspectives on matters like teaching and research, and on problems that can cause careers to stall. They can negotiate a shift in the allocation of their job responsibilities — which at Denver is 40 percent scholarship or creative activity, 40 percent teaching, and 20 percent service — to a mix that better reflects their interests and strengths. And they can periodically tap designated funds to pursue professional-development opportunities beyond scholarly conferences.

A three-year pilot phase of the policy, developed by the faculty and governed by the Faculty Senate, is set to begin this fall.

"It's more about bringing the faculty member along than pushing them out," says Charles (Chip) Reichardt, a professor of psychology at Denver who chaired the three faculty development subcommittees that crafted the policy.

In the mid-1990s, public universities faced increasing skepticism from trustees and lawmakers regarding faculty productivity and the relevance of scholars' work. Administrators turned to post-tenure review as a way to take stock of a professor's teaching, research, and service. Many professors see the process as time-consuming and ripe for abuse by administrators who want to get rid of tenured personnel.

In 2016, the regents of the University of Wisconsin system revised its post-tenure review policy to include tenured professors receiving an independent review by an administrator every five years. The faculty saw that as clearing the way for administrators to overturn performance reviews done by professors' peers. Four

years ago, after its Board of Regents set a deadline, the University of Kansas adopted post-tenure review, set to occur every seven years. Faculty members complained about, among other things, the amount of time they would have to spend being reviewed, or reviewing their colleagues.

The Denver faculty had similar concerns, which could have made for some contentious conversations between the senate, administrators, and board members.



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Barry Zink (right), a professor of physics at the U. of Denver, consults with Devin Wesenberg, a graduate student. Tenured professors can shift their work focus to include more research — or less — under a new faculty-development policy.

"Even though there's good relationships between the faculty leadership and the chancellor and provost, faculty want to distrust administrators," Reichardt says.

Gregg Kvistad, Denver's provost, says that he worked behind the scenes as a bridge between the board and the faculty. He tried to get the board to "trust the faculty to come up with something reasonable." And he talked to key faculty members about what was at stake.

"I let them know the very best policy that is going to govern faculty behavior is going to come from the faculty," Kvistad recalls. "If we don't look into this, it is at least conceivable that the board will say we're going to mandate post-tenure review, and you come up with a policy in six months, and we're going to be done with it."

Fortunately, the senate had a recent track record of collaborative work with trustees and administrators in revamping Denver's promotion and tenure policy to give non-tenure-track faculty members multiyear contracts and new faculty

titles that reflect a career path tailored for them. Still, even with that history, "I don't think many board members were focused on the professional-development perspective that ultimately came to fruition," says Doug Scrivner, the chair of Denver's board.

In the end, the focus on professional development resonated with board members whose business backgrounds meant they were familiar with investing in people over a career cycle, says Scrivner, a former general counsel at Accenture, the global management-consulting firm.

That focus also resonated with the Denver faculty. The senate voted to approve the faculty-development policy. Some faculty members, however, are concerned that the policy will turn into a de facto post-tenure review. And some fear that peer-to-peer conversations won't be confidential — or useful.

Such wariness meant documents had to be vetted and revetted by the faculty as the policy was created by senate committees. Careful wording was critical so as not to trigger distrust. For instance, using the phrase "post-tenure review" was a nonstarter.

"If we had kept that label, it never would have passed," Reichardt says.

The goal is for the policy to be fully adopted in the fall, although training for peer-to-peer discussions has already begun. The conversations, which are designed to allow peers to guide professors through sticky issues like plotting a career trajectory or work-life balance, are recommended but not required.

For all its developmental focus, the new policy does have some teeth to allow Denver to act when a faculty member's work isn't up to par. If a faculty member receives a notice of "unsatisfactory job performance" in the same area on an annual review three years out of five, then a department chair can require professional development or change a professor's job responsibilities.



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Lawrence Conyers, a professor of anthropology at the U. of Denver, leads a class. As part of Denver's faculty-development plan, tenured professors can get feedback on their teaching and other aspects of their scholarship in formal peer-to-peer conversations.

Senate president. "What you're doing when you've been at the university for 25 years is not the same as what you did when you started."

Reichardt, whose entire 40-year academic career has been at Denver, says he's an example of that. In the last 10 years, he's taken on more service work. "I didn't do that as a junior faculty member," he says.

That kind of faculty-driven shift is what Denver's new policy hopes to encourage.

"Once you've got tenure you can antagonize people or bring them in," Reichardt says. "You can get the most out of them rather than force them to fit a cookie-cutter mold."

The plan is for money to be available for all faculty members to take advantage of professional-development opportunities every three years. Having the support to attend a conference outside of one's field, for instance, could be the catalyst for a collaboration that might push a professor's teaching or research into a direction

A shift in work responsibilities seems to be just what some professors want. Support for it was overwhelming, with 63 percent of tenured or tenure-track faculty members who responded to a Faculty Senate survey saying they "strongly agree" or "agree" with it as part of faculty development.

"In reality, people change throughout their careers," says Arthur C. Jones, a teaching professor of music, culture, and psychology and a former Faculty

that breathes new life into a career, says Willink, the Faculty Senate president. In the fall of 2020, a committee from her group will evaluate how the policy is working and revise it if needed.

"Faculty development is not a punishment," says Eleanor McNeese, a professor of English who chaired the committee that crafted the professional-development aspect of the policy. "The final goal was to make people understand that they couldn't get tenure and just rest."

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This article is part of:

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A version of this article appeared in the February 16, 2018 issue.

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