

On Extending the Probationary Period

There are good reasons for a seven-year maximum probationary period.

By James G. Andrews

A number of U.S. institutions of higher education are considering multiyear extensions of the widely accepted seven-year maximum probationary period for all tenure-track faculty. Such a substantial extension is to be distinguished from, and exists in addition to, the ad hoc short-term extensions that many institutions may now grant to individual probationary faculty on a case-by-case basis (for example, in response to requests for maternity or parental leave, or to care for a sick relative). Multiyear extensions for all tenure candidates would represent a major change in longstanding academic practice and are, I believe, seriously misguided.

The faculty's primary role in assessing the appropriateness of extending the probationary period follows directly from its well-established role in shared governance. The 1966 [*Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*](#) provides not only that the faculty be involved in all academic matters, but also that it play the primary role in, among other matters, institutional decisions regarding appointment, reappointment, promotion, tenure, and dismissal.

Proposals for multiyear extensions of the maximum probationary period provide faculty with a convenient opportunity to reexamine the rationale for limiting that period to no more than seven years—a limit that has remained the most widely accepted national standard, irrespective of academic institution and academic discipline, since it was initially adopted by the AAUP and the Association of American Colleges (now the Association of American Colleges and Universities) in the widely accepted joint [*1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*](#). Most informed observers would agree that it is reasonable to insist upon satisfactory faculty development during a probationary period of some significant duration before granting the special privileges and corresponding obligations associated with tenure. The rationale for a substantial probationary period is that it provides adequate time for a well-qualified, highly motivated, and adequately supported candidate to establish the sort of record of achievement in teaching, scholarship or creative work, and service needed to justify a tenured faculty appointment. At issue here is the upper limit that should be placed on the probationary period.

If It Ain't Broke . . .

What problem is the proposed change designed to address and resolve? Advocates of a multiyear extension believe that the seven-year limit simply does not allow enough time for tenure-track faculty to establish a record of achievement sufficient to justify a tenured appointment. They offer a variety of reasons—that research has become more

complicated and time-consuming than it used to be, that extensive peer-review processes delay the initiation of externally funded research and the publication of results, that there is more high-risk–high-gain research leading to more research dead ends and delays in obtaining results, and that extending the probationary period would particularly benefit women faculty—and they appear to be motivated by concerns of fairness to tenure candidates.

Before citing these reasons, however, advocates of extending the probationary period should consider whether more fundamental conditions that underlie the seven-year limit have been met. These conditions, essential to the fairness of the existing system, include the following:

- The recruitment process used to identify and appoint probationary faculty is sufficiently selective.
- The standards for achieving tenure are appropriate.
- Reappointment and evaluation procedures appropriately direct the efforts of probationary faculty.
- Institutional support for probationary faculty is adequate.
- Working conditions for probationary faculty encourage them to continue actively to pursue an academic career (by offering attractive compensation and benefits, effective mentoring, acceptable teaching and service assignments, attractive research opportunities, and sufficient time for recreational activities and family responsibilities).

Deficiencies in the above areas of faculty support should be addressed before an extension of the probationary period is contemplated.

Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that these conditions are not always satisfied at U.S. institutions of higher education. In fact, many tenured faculty members would acknowledge that tenure standards have been slowly raised and continue to rise, that the process leading to tenure recommendations often does not receive the critical peer attention it requires, that institutional support of probationary faculty is not all that it should be, and that the experiences of probationary faculty may not reinforce the initial choice to pursue an academic career.

Those who argue that particular academic units or disciplines require a different and more prolonged probationary period, however, should be reminded that the application of the seven-year limit to all U.S. higher education faculty works because those who are primarily responsible for making the critical judgment about the candidate's qualifications for tenure are the candidate's faculty peers and the administrators of the candidate's academic units. Thus, a particular institution's and an academic unit's missions, the candidate's academic discipline and particular areas of specialization and emphasis, and the institution's standards for the granting of tenured appointments are all potentially incorporated into the tenure review and recommendation process.

The seven-year limit is a necessary safeguard to protect the candidate from prolonged exploitation by his or her institution. The limit is based on the recognition that the qualifications for tenure—whatever they may be in any particular academic unit—are not just an initial standard for candidates to meet or exceed, but also represent a level of sustained effort, commitment, and achievement that all successful tenure candidates are expected to demonstrate. When viewed from this long-term perspective, the seven-year limit has proved to be a sufficient period of time for qualified faculty peers to make an informed judgment regarding a candidate's ability and motivation to continue to fulfill the responsibilities of a tenured faculty member and to progress to the highest professorial rank and the standards this rank requires.

Problems with Extensions

One of the most important reasons for opposing multiyear extensions of the maximum probationary period is the inappropriate faculty behavior this already extensive period often encourages. During the probationary period, tenure-track faculty members have only limited job security and exist in an environment where their academic future rests primarily in the hands of their qualified faculty peers and their academic unit administrators. Consequently, probationary faculty members generally have many colleagues and several administrators to please, not just a single individual. And since peer-group recommendations that are not unanimous or nearly unanimous may be rejected at some higher administrative level, especially during periods of financial austerity, pleasing all of one's tenured faculty colleagues and academic administrators is a goal of more than a few probationary faculty.

Many probationary faculty members learn to survive in this precarious environment by operating in a way that is inconsistent with the sort of behavior that is expected of responsible and effective members of the tenured faculty. That is, they learn to retreat from their colleagues into their offices, laboratories, clinics, or classrooms and avoid possible confrontations and suppress opinions that might irritate or annoy their tenured faculty peers and academic administrators. The longer the probationary period for tenure-track faculty lasts, the more ingrained the behavior caused by this environment may become. The behavior may also be more likely to persist after tenure if a faculty member believes that the behavior contributed in the first place to the achievement of tenure and academic success.

Extension of the already substantial seven-year maximum probationary period would prolong the period in which faculty receive lower pay, exert less influence, and have less job security. It could also encourage the sort of isolated and dysfunctional faculty behavior that is likely eventually to erode effective peer-review processes, shared governance practices, and tenured appointments themselves.

Those who advocate a multiyear extension of the probationary period need first to consider whether their concerns could be addressed by providing better institutional support and direction for probationary faculty. The burden of providing evidence that extension of the well established seven-year probationary period is needed rests with

those who seek it. Until such evidence is presented, the academic profession will be best served by adhering to the standard probationary period.

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{This article originally appeared in the January-February 2009 issue (Volume 95, Number 1) of *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*}