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Suffolk professors fear evaluations could erode tenure

Process could bring dismissals

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 24, 2014

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Suffolk University, taking aim at academia's hallowed practice of providing lifelong job protection for veteran instructors, has decided to require all its tenured faculty to undergo performance reviews that in some cases could lead to dismissal.

The recent move by the private university is drawing protests from dozens of professors and a national association of academics.

While most public universities, including those in the University of Massachusetts system, conduct what is called post-tenure review, performance reviews that can result in discipline for tenured faculty are significantly less common at private schools, and few in the Boston area have them.

For its part, Suffolk says it is adding the reviews to ensure that tenured professors maintain the quality of research and teaching.

“We have to be more explicit and rigorous about demonstrating that we are accountable,” said Suffolk president James McCarthy. “Parents, students, accrediting agencies, and the federal government are no longer willing to accept ‘take our word for it; we’re doing a good job.’ ”

However, he stressed that “Suffolk is not ending tenure.”

Many professors, though, see the step as an erosion of the protections of tenure and the freedom to pursue academic studies without fear of political pressure from the university.

“This is destroying tenure; there’s no other word,” said Charles Baker, head of the Massachusetts conference of the American Association of University Professors, which has issued a formal statement condemning the policy at Suffolk.

Some faculty said they do not mind the new post-tenure review policy, but they are worried about another new set of rules that give the university more power to discipline and fire tenured professors, perhaps at any point and even outside of a performance review process.

Suffolk’s board of trustees approved the changes this month as part of a broader effort to establish a universitywide faculty handbook for its three schools, which have used separate, somewhat contradictory, handbooks.

Under the new provisions, which take effect July 1, each of the university’s 246 tenured faculty members will be reviewed every five years by administrators — their dean and provost — and will be given a rating



that shows they exceed, meet, partially meet, or do not meet expectations, according to a copy of the handbook provided to the Globe.

Positive results would probably trigger a pay raise or other form of recognition. But professors who receive the lowest rating would be put on a development plan to improve performance. If they subsequently failed to meet expectations, those professors could face sanctions, up to and including dismissal.

McCarthy said the language is similar to post-tenure reviews that have been administered for several years to faculty in the university's business school.

Only about half of private universities require such reviews, according to studies done several years ago by Harvard University and the American Association for Higher Education and Accreditation.

Some other universities have also added post-tenure review policies in recent years. Ball State University in Indiana is considering adopting a similar policy. Two years ago, administrators at St. Louis University retreated on a proposal to implement reviews after pushback from professors and others, according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

A report published in 2002 by the Chronicle of Higher Education found that post-tenure review "has not translated to significant firings of either lazy professors or controversial ones" and that some professors are in favor of the reviews.

The portion of professors who are tenured or in tenure-track positions has dropped dramatically over the last four decades, says the professors' association. In 1975, about 45 percent of professors either had tenure or were on tenure track. Today, the group said, only 24 percent of all higher education instructors hold tenure or tenure-track positions.

At Suffolk, located downtown and on Beacon Hill, the faculty handbook contains specific language designed to protect academic freedom for faculty. But professors said that the wording falls short. For example, faculty said, a tenured professor whose research is sometimes critical of corporations might be worried that the work would upset trustees, some of whom are business executives.

"In higher education today, there's real tenure and faux tenure," said one professor who asked not to be identified for fear of backlash from administrators. "We've now been moved to faux tenure."

John Berg, a tenured government professor at Suffolk, said he is particularly concerned by parts of the handbook that seem vague.

"The big issue, for me, is that it seems to say that only the provost and the dean are involved in post-tenure review — no elected faculty committee," he said.

But campus administrators said peer review would be a major component of the five-year assessments, and they expect such language to be added to the handbook.

Dozens of faculty from both the college of arts and sciences and the law school at Suffolk have signed one of two letters to protest the move.

Unlike the college of arts and sciences faculty letter, the law school letter did not specifically object to post-tenure review. Instead, it focused its concern on a part of the handbook that allows the university to sanction and terminate tenured faculty independent of performance reviews.

“The conferral of tenure brings with it an expectation that a tenured professor may be terminated only for demonstrated incompetence or substantial neglect of duty; serious professional or personal misconduct; or severe financial exigency,” said a copy of the law school faculty’s letter obtained by the Globe.

But “the proposed handbook’s ‘actionable conduct’ section is so broadly worded that a series of minor ‘violations’ of actionable conduct provisions may be sufficient to impose major sanctions, even including termination,” the letter said.

Suffolk administrators, taking into account opinions from the faculty senate, spent a year drafting the handbook.

Ultimately, the handbook’s wording is controlled by trustees. While minor tweaks may be made, McCarthy said, he does not foresee any major changes being made to the post-tenure review component.

“We have to see how this works in practice,” he said.

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