15. The Importance of External Reviews in Composition Studies

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A TENURE REVIEW, AS SAM JOHNSON OBSERVED OF AN IMPENDING HANGING, wonderfully focuses the mind. During one particularly interesting period in my life, in the course of several moves to accommodate a dual-career marriage, I underwent four tenure reviews in seven years. In recent years, comfortably tenured, I routinely serve as an external evaluator of English Departments and writing programs, as well as an external reviewer of scholarship in numerous cases of tenure and promotion—not to mention grant proposals, fellowship applications, and submissions to journals and presses. In the immortal words of Ann Landers, I've “been there, honey.” As my mind wonderfully focused on the nature of these myriad reviews in preparation for this chapter, I was forcibly reminded of how variable and subjective the process is, how political, and ultimately, how helpful reviews, of individual scholarship and of entire programs, can be to both candidate and institution, if done well.

ELASTIC CRITERIA FOR TENURE AND PROMOTION

Whatever the local departmental or institutional definitions of teaching, scholarship, and service may be, their actual meaning resides in interpretations more or less variable, as determined by diverse review committees, chairpersons, deans, and other administrators. Because the nature of academic work is diverse and ever-changing, God (or Godot, if you prefer) has to be in the details. There's no way a school, or a department, or for that matter a discipline, can anticipate the wide range of developments in the field or
in the possible work its faculty will do from one year to the next. Individual reviewers and committees must have enough flexibility to exercise their sense of the current state of the art, the cutting edge, the retrograde.

In scholarship, for instance, what is the right amount and nature of publication? What is the pecking order among journals and presses—and is it different for composition and rhetoric than for literature? If not refereed, is a publication beyond the pale? Are single-authored works worth more than collaborations? How are edited volumes or collections to be weighted? What is the status, if any, of on-line “publications”? Do reviews “count”? Do textbooks? Workbooks? Software? Instructional videos? Or are the latter four evidence of teaching rather than scholarship? Or some hybrid? How, if at all, should a personnel review treat work submitted but not accepted, work in progress, unfunded grant proposals? Each of these questions has, perforce, innumerable temporary answers, each embedded in a particular context. Although we wouldn’t have it any other way, this necessary flexibility requires continual fine-tunings that depend on a complicated confluence of subjective judgments.

The elastic nature of such standards may be even more conspicuous in rhetoric and composition. Here diverse research methodologies (including case studies, ethnographies, and quantitative empirical investigation) and emphasis on teaching and administration, although normative, are not necessarily understood by peers in more traditional literary fields. Should directing a writing program be considered teaching, because the director usually trains teachers, develops curricula, and may offer consultations or workshops to other faculty members and public school teachers? Or service, for everything provided is a service to the program’s constituents? Or—as Boyer might argue—scholarship, reflecting the theoretical and intellectual basis, and biases, of the discipline and applying them to diverse student populations, inside and outside of traditional classrooms? How can such teaching (or service or scholarship) be evaluated? Through students’ progress—in the course, throughout their undergraduate studies, or on the job? Cost of delivery of services? The director’s ability to keep the program under control and out of the hair of the other faculty? Community outreach and articulation with the area high schools?

The fact remains that, despite the best efforts of schools and professional organizations to establish and enforce uniform, objective standards for tenure and promotion, departments and institutions still have the flexibility, born of criteria which are variable of necessity, to retain and promote the people they want to keep and to wash out the rest. To rephrase a signal idea from Alice in Wonderland, my guess is that in most reviews for tenure
and promotion, the verdict is reached first, implicitly, and the justification is adduced afterward, when the evidence is formally examined. These may be fighting words in a litigious era where people talk in code instead of making the reasons explicit. Nevertheless, I would contend after having served as department chair and on numerous committees at relatively benign schools, internal reviewers are in for no surprises, although the candidates themselves may be, for their reviewers’ decisions will reflect the prevailing norms of their intramural culture (see chapter six, “Teaching College English,” and Torgovnick, Crossing, chapter four). In such a culture, external reviews—of programs and of individuals’ work—are necessary.

THE NECESSITY OF EXTERNAL REVIEWS

External reviews are necessary, not because the reviewers are any more objective than individual departments or institutions—they’re not—but because they’re removed from them, and therefore at least in theory, free of local concerns, including alignments in departmental feuds and their sense of current priorities. Although many English departments now hire specialists in composition and rhetoric, in most departments their numbers are not large. Thus their tenure and promotion will be determined by colleagues from another culture, most likely, literary studies. It is particularly important for such candidates’ work to be commented on by external experts in composition and rhetoric chosen, through suggestions from both the candidates and the department chair, because of their national reputations. These external reviewers can be expected not only to know a great deal about the discipline they represent and to understand its national, perhaps international, implications, but also to be highly partisan toward it. How could they be otherwise?

In the course of the review—whether on a site visit to a writing program or in a letter evaluating the candidate’s scholarship—the reviewer becomes an advocate for that discipline, though not necessarily for the individual candidate. The external reviewer’s primary task, although I have never seen it stated in any departmental or institutional charge to a reviewer, is to interpret the nature of the candidate’s work or program for the actual and potential readers of the report, the department, the dean, the university review committee(s), the provost—and, should tenure be denied, for anyone else who might read the documents during appeal.

If done with thoroughness and care—following, for instance, the ADE and WPA standards for external reviews—a thoughtful reviewer’s report will educate its readers, even those who think they already know what the rapidly changing field of composition studies is, or does, or can do. (If it
better fits your needs, substitute writing program, freshman English, or another alternative for composition studies in that sentence.) As Rowe notes, "Even the writing of ephemeral evaluations helps constitute a national and an international scholarly community." This is an extension of "our teaching mission both in the classroom and in our professional exchanges" (48–49). The reviewer's interpretations of anyone's work will need to explain to specialists in other areas of English studies, or other disciplines entirely, the nature of that work, its actual and potential dimensions, and its implications and consequent significance, at the departmental and institutional levels and in the profession at large. This may involve translation of the candidate's normative language, concepts, and values into those the readers can understand and appreciate.

A CHARACTERISTIC CASE

Let us consider the issues involved in a characteristic case. Often—some would argue too often, though I would not—a brand new Ph.D., let's call her Alice, with a specialization in composition studies is hired to direct the English Department's, and so the college's, writing program. A minimal list (after all, you readers are busy people) of her duties follows. This is an embellishment of the typical composition specialist's job described in Slevin.

Alice plans the freshman composition curriculum, coordinates it with upper-division writing courses, revises it annually, and oversees the summer placement of incoming students into the appropriate courses. She appoints and teaches the new TAs and adjuncts (a modest ten per year) how to teach composition, formally through a one-semester course each year and informally through a mentoring program which involves the more experienced part-timers (some twenty-five in all). Every year she evaluates the writing portfolios of all the new teachers' students, and she provides both a conference and a written personnel evaluation of each teacher every year. She writes institutional grant proposals to secure computer classrooms and a campus-wide writing center and then, because funds are tight, teaches and monitors the TAs assigned to work in these areas. She chairs the English Department's Freshman English Committee, and serves on the university committee inaugurating a writing-across-the-disciplines program. She is continually trouble shooting as well as negotiating with the department chair and the dean over class size, program funding, and hiring.

Alice is given one course released time each semester, a twenty-hour a-week graduate assistant throughout the academic year, a work-study student for ten hours per week during the summer, and pay for one extra summer month. She shares department secretarial services. Like other
faculty members, she is expected to attend professional meetings, to publish, and in other ways to be professionally active. Although she is a new faculty member, Alice is in fact expected to do as much administrative work as her department chair, although without his institutional power.

If Alice does her work well, much of it will be invisible or buried in reports and statistical compilations. Only those who have held comparable positions, including most of the external evaluators whose judgment might be called upon during a tenure review, can fully understand the demands, pressures, potential, and constraints under which Alice works.

External review of the writing program

Because Alice’s work as WPA is remote from the experience of many who will evaluate her tenure file, it can be extremely helpful to have an external review of the writing program the year before tenure review, in order to put on the record a knowledgeable, fair-minded yet sympathetic analysis of the director’s work. Two reports are crucial in such a review: the program self-study, prepared in advance of the visit, usually written or coordinated by the writing director; and the response of the external evaluator (or evaluation team) to both the report and the campus visit.

The program self-study customarily addresses such matters as curriculum (including philosophy, courses, instructional methods and materials, responses to student writing, and assessment), faculty working conditions and development, and various aspects of program administration (see the WPA self-study guidelines in Edward White 304–13). It highlights program goals, strengths, problems and inadequacies. The evaluator’s report should address the same issues and others, if necessary, as well as commend successes and suggest solutions to difficulties (see Beidler; McLeod; and Edward White, chapter twelve).

The self-study anatomizes the writing program and lays out the director’s track record, and the evaluator’s response assesses both. So the external evaluator (or evaluation team) is collaborating with the writing director and the department to strengthen the program and, if the evaluation is being conducted the year before a tenure vote, to provide evidence for the director’s tenure review. External program reviews are not necessarily or uniformly favorable. But their analysis of existing deficits and problems often deflects potential criticism of the director by identifying institutional difficulties, such as underfunding and lack of administrative support.

External review of scholarship

Alice’s scholarship, as well as her work as writing director, figures in her review for tenure and promotion. Some people might ask whether she
should be judged according to the same criteria afforded faculty peers who teach somewhat more but have few if any administrative duties. I believe that, to prevent composition studies specialists from being stigmatized by a double standard, the same qualitative criteria must apply to all. Of course, such criteria, and the relative weighting of individual areas of scholarship, teaching, and service, may—and should—be adjusted by the department and university review committees when a candidate carries the sort of administrative burden Alice does.

In reviewing candidates’ work for tenure and promotion to Associate Professor, I use the following criteria, applicable equally to scholarship in composition studies and literature:

1. Is the candidate aware of the major and some minor dimensions of his/her research area, including pertinent research issues, methodologies, and significant literature?
2. If so, in what ways does the candidate draw on the established body of research in the field?
3. In what ways is the candidate contributing to the ongoing research in the field? Synthesizing, summarizing, or interpreting the research of others to audiences unfamiliar with this? Using others’ research as the basis for investigations into new areas? Making innovations in methodology or theory?
4. If either of the latter, how significant does the candidate’s ongoing research appear to be? Minor (either going over old ground, or dealing with peripheral or trivial issues or with trivial aspects of a potentially significant issue)? Middle-level, representing some solid contributions to the existing state of knowledge or state of the methodological art? (Such research can usually be extended or expanded, or can lead to additional areas; it’s good work on which to build.) High-level, representing innovative thinking or innovative methodology that will be on the cutting edge of the field, that will influence the work of subsequent researchers, and that will engender other significant related research projects, of the candidate as well as others?
5. Has the candidate made significant contributions to the discipline through participation in national and/or regional professional organizations, or establishment of a teaching or critical canon or curriculum? Has the candidate aided in the professional development of others, faculty or students?

How the candidate’s review committee and department employs and weights these, or any other criteria, is beyond the outside evaluator’s control. The evaluator can only be clear and emphatic about the quality and importance of the candidate’s work. When, as in Alice’s case, a WPA is a candidate for tenure/promotion, the evaluator also has an obligation to demonstrate how each criterion is applicable to the work the writing director has been hired to do (see Council of Writing Program Administrators “Guidelines”).
Thus, my view of materials to be evaluated expands considerably the conventional materials that Rowe expects the external reviewer to address. If Alice has developed a freshman curriculum, for instance, the external reviewer should be supplied with materials that will indicate its philosophy, underlying scholarship, and quality. In addition to conventional publications in scholarly journals and books, these could include textbooks, instructional software, workshop handouts, curriculum guides, advice to teachers in the writing program, syllabi, writing assignments, graded papers, portfolio summaries, and student evaluations—preferably written commentary.

By increasing the scope of materials reviewed beyond the conventional books, articles, and conference papers, the external reviewer of candidates in composition studies, affirming Boyer’s views, is implicitly lobbying for their legitimacy in a tenure review. The home team may, at any level, elect to ignore these materials and may, consequently, discount the external reviewer’s evaluation. Nevertheless, these materials become and remain part of the candidate’s record, for all to consider—or to reconsider if a negative decision is appealed.

CONCLUSION

That English Departments are changing to incorporate experts in composition studies into their mainstream faculty is unmistakable, as Bettina Huber’s recent reports to the ADE and MLA (“Women,” “Changing,” “Recent,” “Survey”) indicate. That the criteria enabling the tenuring of such experts are being expanded and revised is less certain.

Conventional literary faculty members should derive their view of composition studies research from the major work—intellectual, theoretical, pedagogical—in the field. Instead, far too many adhere to the view represented in Richard Marius’s surly indictment of the work in composition studies as essentially pragmatic and unintellectual:

I maintain that, against the background of the present practical state of the discipline, all the research going on in composition and rhetoric matters not at all. I can think of no book or article devoted to research or theory that has made a particle of difference in the general teaching of composition for the past twenty or thirty years—and I can think of a great many commonly held assumptions in the discipline that are supported by no major research at all.

One cannot therefore consider in any realistic way the state of scholarship in composition without calling attention to the woeful condition of the discipline itself that renders all scholarship merely ornamental. Composition remains overwhelmingly practical . . . the most important books are textbooks [atheoretical and uninformed by research] (“Composition Studies” 466).
In this myopic reading of the discipline, composition studies is a lost cause. If Marius were right, either prevailing criteria for tenure and promotion would have to change dramatically to reward atheoretical, unimaginative recycling of stale, ineffectual pedagogy or else no specialist in composition studies would be tenurable. Fortunately, this is not the case.

To rebut Marius is beyond the scope of the discussion here; Donald McQuade's essay on "Composition and Literary Studies," following Marius's in Redrawing the Boundaries, provides a necessary corrective. And a wealth of notable composition research books and articles provide prima facie evidence of sophisticated theory, wide reading, keen critical intelligence, and humane understanding of politics, philosophy, and pedagogy. Three prizewinning works published since 1990 are representative of current scholarship in composition studies at the highest level in Criterion 4, mentioned earlier: Kurt Spellmeyer's Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition; Susan Miller's Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition; and Lester Faigley's Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition.

Academia, however avant garde intellectually, is in governance wedded to tenure and promotion review procedures that make it, as Lewis Carroll's Queen observed, "A slow sort of country" where "it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!" Composition studies faculty members, whether candidates for tenure and promotion or their external reviewers, know this running metaphor all too well. In both research and administration, as current work indicates, we are of necessity on a fast track. There is no other place.

NOTES

1. The choice of a woman for this example is deliberate. (See Holbrook; chapter sixteen, "I Want"; and Miller, chapter four, "The Sad Women in the Basement: Images of Composition Teaching.") The following list of duties is an embellishment of the typical composition specialist's job described in Slevin. See also the Council of Writing Program Administrators' guidelines for WPA positions; Carter and McClelland; and Roen.

2. Conventional, institution-wide course evaluations are based on an efficiency model rewarding large-scale lecture courses that deliver large amounts of material in a clear, organized fashion with little interchange between students and lecturer. This model does not apply very well to the messy, improvisatory,
collaborative nature of many writing classrooms. Moreover, short- or long-term, small- or large-scale, institution-wide assessment programs are freighted with difficulties (see Witte and Faigley; Edward White, chapters 11–13; Greenberg et al.; and the WPA self-study guidelines).