

A professor's career

The Cranky Professor

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Professors at Saint Mary's undergo three or four major evaluations during their careers, in addition to the one that got them hired in the first place. Professors are evaluated when they come up for renewal, when they apply for tenure, when they apply for promotion to the rank of associate professor, and when they apply for promotion to the rank of (full) professor. As well, professors each year undergo a minor evaluation. Professors each year file an annual report, on which their department colleagues and their Dean may comment.

I'm speaking only of those professors who are permanent members of faculty. Professors who teach part time, or on sessional contracts, or otherwise haven't stepped onto the tenure track, are evaluated at different times, in somewhat different ways.

When a person is hired for a permanent faculty position at a university, he or she is said to be on the tenure track. After three years, if all goes well, his or her contract is renewed. In his or her fourth year, he or she applies for tenure. If the application is denied, then his or her fifth year at the university is his or her last. If the application is successful, he or she begins his or her sixth year as a tenured professor.

Tenure as an institution is closely connected to academic freedom. Tenure makes it difficult for administrators to discipline or fire a professor of whose views or methods they disapprove.

Professors on the tenure track almost always are at the rank of assistant professor. At the time they apply for tenure, or soon after they receive tenure, they apply for promotion to the rank of associate professor. A professor must hold the rank of associate professor for at least eight years before he or she can be promoted to the rank of professor (called "full professor"). During or after his or her seventh year as an associate professor at Saint Mary's, then, a professor compiles a dossier and applies for promotion to full professor.

The criteria by which committees and officers of the university evaluate professors who apply for tenure or promotion are quality of research, quality of teaching, and quality of service. The candidate attempts in his or her dossier to make a case that he or she meets at least minimal standards in all three areas, and that he or she really shines in at least one of the first two.

The candidate is evaluated first by his or her department. Members of the department examine the candidate's dossier, they meet to decide whether to recommend tenure or promotion, whichever they are considering, and they write a report explaining and justifying their decision.

The candidate's dossier and the department's report go to the Dean, to a university committee, and to the Vice-President Academic. If any group or officer recommends against tenure or promotion, the thing comes to a halt, though there are appeal procedures to which the candidate can turn. Should all go well, the recommendation in favour of the candidate goes to the president. The president has final say, and may reject the application.

Let's put all this together. Sally, let's say, was hired by Saint Mary's just this past July for a permanent position. Sally is thirty-four. She received her doctorate in 2006 and has taught on ten-month and one-year contracts for the last three years. Now she is a new tenure-track professor. At the end of each of her first two years, she files a report. She will hear from her department and the Dean whether her work in each of the three areas is strong or weak, and receive advice how to improve where she is weak. During her third year, she compiles a small dossier to be used in determining whether her probationary contract is to be renewed. Let us imagine that Sally does well and that her contract is renewed.

During her fourth year, Sally compiles a substantial dossier for her tenure application. Let's suppose her application is successful. That means that Sally begins her sixth year a tenured professor. She updates her dossier and submits it with her application for promotion to associate professor. Let us suppose Sally's application for promotion is also successful.

Sally begins her seventh year at Saint Mary's as an associate professor. It is now the school year 2015-2016. Sally is eligible to apply for promotion to full professor in 2023-2024, but she holds off a couple of years, and applies in 2025. (Sally was worried that her record of research was a bit thin. She waited until receiving word that her book would be published.) She begins the year 2026-2027 a full professor.

In 2040, at the age of 65, Sally retires from Saint Mary's, having enjoyed a fine career. (Although retired, Sally continues to conduct research and to publish, and she is in demand at conferences and as a guest lecturer.) Her department recommends that she be honoured with the title Professor Emeritus, and Saint Mary's agrees.

Though ours is a community of both professors and students (and others besides), I find that students often don't know much about professors—about what professors do or about the shape of a professor's career. I hope that this column is of at least a little use to students curious about those strange people always carrying on in front of the whiteboards.