

Introduction to University: Lecture One

A first look at professors

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Some professors are permanent members of faculty, others aren't. That's the first great divide. Those professors who are not permanent members of faculty are either teaching on an appointment of one year, ten months, or eight months (it depends on the university) or are teaching on a per-course basis. Those teaching on a sessional appointment are paid a salary based on their experience. Those teaching on a per-course basis are poorly paid and often have to make a living by cobbling together courses at two or three different universities.

Permanent members of faculty are either on the tenure track or tenured. Tenure track professors are on probation. A tenure-track professor is hired on the explicit understanding that by meeting certain criteria in his or her first four or five years of work he or she will be granted tenure and, thereby, become a permanent member of faculty.

Besides being either permanent or not, and tenured or tenure track, each professor has a rank. He or she is an assistant professor, an associate professor, or a professor (a full professor). Professors on sessional appointments, professors teaching on a per-course basis, and professors on the tenure track are typically assistant professors. An assistant professor will apply for promotion to the rank of associate professor either at the same time he or she applies for tenure or one or two years after he or she gains tenure. A professor must serve at the rank of associate professor for eight years before becoming a (full) professor.

A professor's salary increases a bit each year in accordance with the pay scale for professors of that rank, a pay scale specified in the collective agreement between his or her union and the university. When a professor is promoted, he or she jumps over to a somewhat richer pay scale. As well, professors the university wants to keep might be paid more than other professors at the same rank and with the same years of experience, to prevent them from accepting offers to teach at another university.

Full professors who retire can be named emeritus (or emerita) professor if the university judges their work to have been outstanding.

So how are professors evaluated by the university? That is, how are professors judged worthy of tenure or promotion?

Research, teaching, service. These are the three areas tenure and promotion committees consider when evaluating an applicant. Has the applicant made a significant contribution to inquiry in his or her discipline? Has he or she taught students well? Has he or she served the department, the university, his or her discipline, higher education, or the community well?

Most significant of these three is research, just in that a professor who is publishing good articles or books is unlikely to be denied tenure or promotion even if his or her teaching or service is substandard. Good teaching, for its part, can save a professor who is an unproductive or poor researcher, although, given the nature of university teaching, it's hard to conceive of a good professor who isn't a good researcher. A record of service, on the other hand, no matter how exemplary, will not gain for an unproductive researcher who can't teach either tenure or promotion.