

Tenure Chase, Part 2: The Axe Falls

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The Axe Falls

As you read the following entries, you will read some very negative comments about Kenyon College and its administration, not all of them supported by factual evidence. To be fair to Kenyon, please bear in mind that many of them were made by friends and colleagues who wanted to boost my spirits, and thus could not be wholly objective.

4/26/94: The difference between being guillotined and being denied tenure is that after being denied tenure, you're still alive. However, the sense of incredulity is the same. You mean this is really happening? You mean there's nothing I can do?

Although I had some anxiety about the upcoming decision this weekend, I fully expected to get the letter on Monday morning saying that I had received Appointment without Limit. Kay was even more certain that I could not possibly be denied. We planned to meet at the Post Office after my 9:10-10:00 class so that we could end the suspense together. But right after my class, a very ominous phone call came from the provost's secretary, saying that the provost wanted to meet me at 11:00. At that point I felt certain that something was wrong, and the sense of certainty grew when Kay and I opened the mailbox and found no official letter. "That's cruel!" she said. But there's no way to take away someone's job without being cruel.

At 11:00 I arrived at the provost's office, the secretary went across the hall to summon the president, and he joined us. The meeting was very brief; it was finished by 11:10. The provost informed me that they had not found it possible to recommend me for Appointment without Limit; that he could not go into detail, but the reason was my teaching. There was not much for me to say. I asked if the criticisms of my teaching came entirely from students or if there had been comments from faculty. The provost said that the concern came from across the spectrum. I asked if the financial circumstances or the appearance of P. F. Kluge's book, with its criticism of the College's recent record of tenuring everybody, had "changed the rules" in any way, made them set the standards higher than they had been. The provost said no. Therefore I am left to infer that they consider me not only the worst teacher of the ten who came up for tenure this year, but the worst to come up for tenure in several years...

It seemed as if I spent most of the afternoon and evening talking... First I talked with Kay and the department chair in my office; the chair assured me again that I had been given the department's unanimous support. He gave me a copy of the departmental letter of recommendation, and also told me that in his own recommendation he had called me "the department's best mathematician since Nikodym," a staggering compliment (Nikodym was a world-famous mathematician, and retired—ironically, under pressure from the administration—in 1964)... Another professor in the department said she had gotten an inkling of what was to happen last week, when she was called into a meeting with the president and provost. Since she was the only member of the department that I had not asked for a letter of recommendation (the rules required me to ask for four, and there are five other people in the department), they wanted to find out her opinion. Actually, that shows they may not have made up their minds even as late as last Wednesday. But she said that each time she told them something positive about me, the response was, "Yes, we already know that." And the questions they asked her were things she simply could not answer.

Later I met with a history professor, who wrote one of my letters of recommendation. We sat under a tree in the graveyard (she said, "I hope you don't mind the symbolism") and talked for over an hour. She was a little skeptical at first of my theory that the decision might have been dictated by the financial pressures and extramural pressures for greater "accountability." But the more she thought about it, the more it made sense to her—with ten people, an unusually large number, being evaluated, it may have seemed irresponsible to the president and provost to give blanket tenure to all ten. Of course, this theory is completely unprovable, because they would never admit to it; and, in a way, it is beside the point now. The decision is made.

4/29/94: I've been feeling much better, in fact positively chipper, over the last three days. So many people have told me that they felt the tenure decision was wrong that I have ceased to see it as a personal failure. Kay's boss said it was the "stupidest thing I've heard in ten years." A biology professor brought us flowers and homemade goodies and said, "Of the ten people who were up for tenure I would have put you at the top, not the bottom." An English professor... was outraged because she thought it was due to the new system whereby students can send in their evaluations by e-mail, which makes it too easy for them to say things that they would not say in a normal letter. A co-worker of Kay said, "It stinks and it's rotten." [Five other colleagues] and probably others I've forgotten have all expressed various forms of dismay or bewilderment. It's especially impressive how many of these people have gone out of their way to talk to us and express their support... We've come to see that a lot of people do appreciate us. It's not Kenyon that has rejected us, but two people at Kenyon...

There will be some more interesting developments in the next few days. Today the math department had a meeting (without me) to discuss the decision, and on Monday they will have a meeting with the provost... On Tuesday the science division will have a meeting, at which one agenda item is a discussion of the promotion and tenure procedure. Two biology professors say they don't think there is a single person in the division who is not upset by the decision, because of its implications for all departments: research doesn't really matter, and the opinions of a few disgruntled students (of which there are always plenty in any intro science course) can outweigh the opinions of the entire department...

At this point it may be necessary to explain a few peculiarities of Kenyon's tenure review system. At the time of this narrative, Kenyon was practically unique among American colleges in not having a Promotion and Tenure Committee. The decision on whether to recommend a candidate for tenure at the trustees' meeting was made entirely by the provost and president, based on a dossier consisting of the following: four letters from faculty in the department, a departmental letter, three letters from faculty outside the department, two letters from faculty at other institutions, and a minimum of 16 (remember this number!) letters from students, out of a list of 36 students compiled half by the tenure candidate and half by the provost. Unlike many other institutions, Kenyon does not use standardized student evaluation forms. Finally, again contrary to standard practice at other institutions, the candidate's department has no access to the dossier.

5/2/94: The department met with the provost today and got a few answers, though not very satisfying ones. He did give out some information on the student letters: out of 36 requested, only 16 were received (but this is fairly normal, and enough to constitute a dossier); of these, he said that four could be characterized as "generally positive" and 12 were "generally negative." Those are daunting numbers. To put it another way, my approval rating was only slightly higher than Richard Nixon's when he resigned the presidency. It's difficult to comprehend how this could be. For one thing, it's amazing to think that out of the 18 names I gave to the provost as students who I thought would probably give me a favorable review, at most four actually did. Either I am vastly mistaken as to the opinion these students held of me, or the administration is reading the letters in a most unusual way.

This evening I thought of three things that I could have done to improve my chances of getting tenure, if I had thought I was in serious trouble. I plan to mention these at tomorrow's science division meeting, for the benefit of people who will come up for tenure in the future. First, collect student evaluations, whether this is departmental policy or not. One reason is to find out about student dissatisfaction early enough to do something about it. The second reason is more cynical: so that you can defend yourself if the administration tries to say that you have a 25% approval rating... Second, if there is concern about your teaching, get a senior faculty person to sit in on your course. Again, there is a positive reason—this person can act as a mentor—and a defensive reason—this person can vouch for what happened in the course even if some students say something ridiculous about it... Third, and something that would never have occurred to me before: get out the vote. If the administration insists on treating the tenure evaluation as a popularity contest, then any faculty member will improve his or her chances by contacting individually the 18 students on his or her list, impressing on them the importance of their letters, and urging them to write.

5/7/94: At the science division meeting it was decided that the division chair would write a letter for the division to the president and provost, but it would not be so much a letter of protest as a letter saying that the tenure decision had raised certain questions and problems about the process... I also gave my advice about how to improve the odds in the tenure process. A biology professor made a most interesting response to that. She said that, the year she came up for tenure, she told all of her students about it, stressed the important consequences the student letters could have and told them that anything negative they said could be used as a pretext to take away her job. As a result, she said, "that was the only evaluation where I didn't get any negative letters."

I've set up a lunch meeting with the provost for next Thursday, and made up a list of several more questions to ask him. After that, and after I've seen the written explanation of why I was denied tenure (which he says I should receive before our meeting), I'll decide whether I want to press a grievance. At present I think that I probably will.

According to the faculty handbook, there are two possible grounds for a grievance: I could either claim a procedural error by the administration, or I could claim that my dossier was not interpreted in a reasonable manner. I think that my best case for a procedural error was that the administration did consult with the chair and one other professor when it was apparent that my case was problematic, but they did not consult with them in a way which would have allowed them to respond effectively. Neither of them was told ahead of time what the subject of their meeting was...

Probably my better case is to argue that the dossier was not interpreted reasonably. Here I can bring up the "formula" by which they are supposed to evaluate it: 55% teaching, 30% research, and 15% collegiate citizenship...

The percentages alluded to above were approved by the faculty, in a perhaps misguided attempt to quantify the unquantifiable. Though it would be impossible to enforce them in any precise way, certainly a gross violation of this policy could be construed as a procedural error.

On May 11 I received the promised letter from the provost outlining the reasons for the negative tenure decision. The letter summarizes my scholarly engagement (30% of the decision) in seven lines and my collegiate citizenship (15% of the decision) in eight lines, and then contains fifty-six lines of commentary on my teaching. Among other things, the provost wrote:

Looking at student evaluations first, I read fewer than one-fourth that are essentially unqualified in their support of your teaching. All of these are from very able students. That leaves a large majority of letters that are mixed or negative. What are you faulted for? A lack of organization in your presentations, a poor sense of your audience and of their difficulties in comprehending what you are teaching, a tendency to criticize unfairly and thereby to intimidate, a tone of unfriendliness towards many students that makes them reluctant to seek your assistance... In general, students from upper-level courses can find elements of strength in your teaching that in some fashion compensate for the difficulties they write about; students from the introductory calculus sequence tend to be simply unenthusiastic about your teaching. There can be no doubt that you are bright, no doubt that you are a very fine mathematician. But you are poorest precisely where the department needs strength—in its introductory calculus sequence...

5/12/94: I'm beginning to find out that contesting my tenure decision, even if it's the right thing to do, is going to be a little bit time-consuming. Last night I spent the entire evening typing up, re-thinking and re-typing the questions I was going to ask the provost in our lunch meeting today. The meeting itself lasted close to two hours. Later in the afternoon I met with an art history professor who went through the grievance procedure five years ago when he was denied promotion to full professor. That meeting lasted another hour and a quarter...

The meeting with the art history professor was even more worthwhile than I expected. He expressed the opinion that the provost is really only a front man for the president. He said that I would be surprised how cursorily the dossier is actually read; he believes that most of the alleged "concerns" in the provost's letter are sought out after the decision has been made. He said that the most important part of my defense is to have the department behind me, and their number one question should be why the president and provost overturned the departmental recommendation, which he characterized as a "terrible precedent" and "serious business." The number two question should be whether that has ever happened before. He said that he thought it was likely that I would win the appeal before the grievance committee... He described to a tee the tactics that the provost has used so far; he said that he would try to "scare the department with the prospect of terrible letters" (i.e. portray the student letters of recommendation, to which we have no access, as extremely negative, so the department will not feel as if it has a chance to win), but that the department should not be convinced. He thought that I had some very good arguments that procedural violations had occurred, starting with the argument that worked for him, namely that the provost's "summary" of the dossier was not a summary but in fact a highly slanted rationalization for his own action...

After my meeting with the art history professor, I'm not sure just how important the accumulation of arguments and counter-arguments will be, if the decision was actually made independently, or somewhat independently, of the facts in the dossier. My conversation with him brought me back to one of my first reactions to the decision: that the administration had been looking to deny tenure to one of the ten candidates, and I was the easiest target. As he said, "It's the same way that a mugger thinks." But, of course, such assertions can never be proved, which is why one has to expend so much time and energy trying to catch them in a procedural error.

5/16/94: Driving to Columbus on Saturday gave me some time to ponder the case a bit more. I'm almost sure that I will file a grievance now. That day was the first day that I felt 100% certain that I was in the right and that I ought to be able to win my case before the grievance committee.

5/22/94: The battle over my tenure decision continues to simmer. I had meetings with the chair of the faculty, who thought I had a strong case and should go ahead with a grievance... The chair of the department and the division had an unproductive meeting with the president and provost, during which, as the department chair reported, the president did "90% of the talking."

Kay and I had a friend over for dinner on Wednesday night, a great morale booster because she has a very low opinion of the president and provost... She considers the president to be like King Lear, receiving counsel from all the wrong places and ignoring most of it...

In retrospect, the administration's arrogance at this stage of the procedure was breathtaking. According to the department chair, during his harangue the president said that the decision could not be reconsidered unless they provided "proof of error." Of course, since the department had no access to the dossier, it is difficult to imagine what such "proof of error" could consist of. As we shall see, the dossier did contain proof of error that the president must have known about.

5/25/94: The wheels have been set in motion. On Monday I delivered my grievance letter to the provost's office. Tomorrow I will have a meeting with the chair of the Grievance Committee. I don't know what to expect from this meeting...

Following the advice of the chair of the college's Grievance Committee to be as specific as possible, I itemized six procedural errors and seven errors of interpretation. I argued that the administration had unreasonably overruled the department's professional opinion on flimsy evidence—the minimum allowable number of student letters. Some other possible errors I cited were the meetings with two members of the department who were not given any advance knowledge of the agenda; failure to interpret my mentorship of Kenyon Summer Science Scholars (a summer research program for undergraduates) as teaching; failure to take into account specific ways that I had improved since the second reappointment; and a summary letter from the provost that was not a fair representation of the dossier.

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