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John Sexton
President

To My Dear Colleagues on the Faculty Council at the School of Medicine,

I have read with care your resolution regarding the performance standards developed from the recommendations of the Academic Excellence Commission. There is clearly a significant divergence of opinion among you – amply demonstrated by the narrow 12-11-1 vote in favor of the resolution -- and I appreciate the energy you are devoting to it. In turn, I wish to give you the courtesy of a forthright and prompt reply.

We would all agree that the granting of tenure to faculty is crucial to the success of any great research university, I no less than you. While you are correct that tenure bestows many career-long privileges upon faculty, tenure may not be viewed as be a one-way commitment; it must instead be understood to be a mutual and reciprocal commitment, one in which both university and faculty have responsibilities.

Here, then, is the basis of one of my two key disagreements with your resolution. In your document conveying your resolution, you cite the definition of tenure as expressed in the Faculty Handbook: "Academic tenure is a means to certain ends, specifically: (1) freedom of teaching and research; and (2) a sufficient degree of economic security to make the profession of teaching attractive to men and women of ability." Nowhere, I would note, does this definition mention faculty responsibilities; yet surely none of us believe that the definition is silent on this point because there is no reciprocal expectation of faculty responsibilities. It is unmentioned, instead, because it is so obvious and clearly understood that it does not warrant mentioning; and it is correspondingly understood that a failure to meet those responsibilities and expectations would have some kind of impact, including - potentially - on salary.

Tenure at NYU does not guarantee a particular salary, nor does it prohibit the reduction of a faculty member's salary if he or she is not meeting the requirements of his or her faculty responsibilities. Indeed, the distinction between tenure and salary is amply demonstrated by our own faculty grievance procedures - there are separate faculty grievance mechanisms for tenure-related matters and salary-related matters.

At heart, your objections focus on the expectations proposed by the Academic Excellence Commission (AEC), especially those putting in place standards for extramural salary support for those faculty involved in research. The notion that

faculty's academic activities are fixed and that compensation is guaranteed at existing levels - or that a change in them in some way undermines tenure - does not bear up under examination. Each year, some faculty are given new assignments or new responsibilities or a different work load; this does not undermine tenure. Salary increases are not uniformly distributed, but apportioned on the basis of merit; this likewise does not undermine tenure. Indeed, as you know, more recently appointed members of the School of Medicine faculty doing research are already working under a requirement of extramural support (which has long been inherent in the understanding for all School of Medicine faculty members), yet tenure still stands strong.

Accordingly, one can properly conclude that the implementation of the AEC performance standards – which were based on the AEC's findings and were accepted by the Dean and approved by the University Provost in accordance with our procedures -- does not have an impact on tenure.

Beyond that, permit me to make two important points on the topic of extramural support in the context of academic medicine generally:

1. By not having such performance standards in place, the School of Medicine is lagging behind the majority of top medical schools in the country, and the attendant lack of accountability has had a regrettable outcome about which we, as colleagues and friends in this great university, must be candid: the SOM's ranking in terms of NIH funding has declined dramatically - where we were once 15th nationally, we are now 36th.
2. The top US medical schools were all able to put performance standards for extramural support in effect without any apparent damage to tenure.

My second key point of disagreement is the implication that the process leading to the adoption of the AEC's recommendations lacked sufficient faculty consultation or input. Nothing could be further from the truth.

- The AEC itself was led by and largely composed of faculty
- The AEC held several town hall meetings for faculty during the period it was preparing its report and had many conversations with faculty members during the course of preparing its report
- The AEC chairs made presentations of their findings to the Faculty Council and Departmental Chairs before the report was finalized The AEC's report was shared with the Faculty Council prior to its release so that the FC could share their views with the dean
- The School of Medicine modified the implementation of the AEC recommendations based on faculty feedback, including:
 - Adoption of additional criteria for recognizing exceptional academic contributions in the evaluation process
 - Accommodations for junior faculty

- Two-year salary support for individuals who lose grants, but had previously met performance standards
- Incentives for faculty who exceed performance standards, and
- The opportunity for a generous voluntary separation package for qualifying faculty, among others measures.

Since you have raised the issues of consultation, governance, and input, I should note my disappointment at the Executive Committee's unusual refusal to have a representative of the Dean speak at its March 16 meeting. Not only is the Dean's Report a standing agenda item and the request to speak was a modest one – five minutes – but it was foreclosed on the basis of “time constraints” even after another speaker had dropped from the meeting's agenda. This does not seem consistent with our proud traditions of consultation, collegiality, or the free exchange of views.

It is certainly the case that for some faculty at the School of Medicine who do research, this will be a change. The School of Medicine faculty are dedicated and valued University citizens, and we are committed to helping them succeed as the AEC recommendations are set in place.

However, it should be understood that this is a change that simply clarifies the responsibilities of research faculty at the School of Medicine as productive contributors to the academic mission of the School, not a change in tenure or of any rights that tenure assures. And I am convinced it will be a change for the better. As a number of your colleagues on the Faculty Council wrote in an open letter to the School of Medicine faculty: “We believe the AEC I metrics are instrumental in ensuring our continued academic success and that they are consistent with those present at other prestigious institutions.” Like them, I feel certain that without these standards the future for the School of Medicine for which we are all collectively striving -- an unchallenged position in the very top tier of US medical schools – will become more distant and less likely.

Sincerely,
John Sexton

Cc: School of Medicine Faculty