

Take Back Our University: *MUNFA's Take on Post-Tenure Review*

Anyone following this round of contract negotiations between MUNFA and the University administration will know that one of the employer's key concessions is to introduce a system of post-tenure review (PTR). Often justified on grounds of efficiency and accountability, and typically introduced in hopes of placating an external audience (usually government), PTR effectively undermines [the logic of academic tenure](#) – a system designed to safeguard academic freedom and allow scholars, after a long probationary period of intensive peer evaluation, to teach and research without worrying that they'll be disciplined (or worse) for intellectual choices that violate administrative sensitivities or preferences.

In reality, PTR engenders specious efficiencies at best, and is unlikely to satisfy critics outside the University anyway. It also carries high and unacceptable costs: a threat to the fundamental conditions for academic freedom, including but not limited to a permanent chilling of the climate for scholarship that takes risks or excites controversy; considerable costs in faculty time, energy and possibly mental health; and damage to collegial relationships. This erosion of tenure will make it harder to attract and retain top researchers, ultimately damaging the University's reputation.

What has the university proposed?

The employer has proposed language mandating regular reviews for all tenured faculty members. If any review is judged to be “unsatisfactory”, a formative plan will be created to address “deficiencies.” If not corrected, the Faculty Member could be disciplined, which could include dismissal.

While the university's proposal is silent on many details, experience elsewhere indicates that PTR often implies that [“the presumption of merit that attaches to tenure should be periodically cast aside so that the faculty member must bear the burden of justifying retention”](#). That is, it effectively shifts the burden of proof for continued employment from the employer to the employee: rather than requiring the employer to demonstrate a faculty member's failure to meet “basic standards of their profession”, faculty can be removed for failing to reach ambiguous standards of “performance”.

Why not PTR?

Faculty sometimes like the sound of PTR as a way to discipline colleagues who they see as not pulling their weight. But it's critical to remember that the Collective Agreement *already* gives the University the ability to deal with “unsatisfactory” or “deficient” work of Faculty Members under Articles 3 (dealing with duties and responsibilities) and 19 (which deals with discipline). The employer's new proposal will simply shift the responsibility to justify continued employment onto ASMs. Those being reviewed will spend time otherwise available for teaching and research *demonstrating* that they are in fact effective teachers and productive researchers. If PTR is delegated to a committee of peers, it will compound our existing P&T burden in a way that will not only take time away from our core duties of research and teaching but also produce acrimony and tension among colleagues.

Regardless of format, mandating regular reviews for all tenured faculty members will encourage us to direct our research and teaching to those performance “measures” that demonstrate productivity, reinforcing an accounting or audit culture in academia. It would foster continuous calculation about how we spend our time. Intangibles that don't “count” for much but that are the very fabric of academic community - time spent mentoring students, reading each other's work, simply talking about ideas – will be pitted against measurable outcomes even more than they already are.

Besides, it's not as if tenured faculty do not face regular assessment as things stand. In addition to our annual activity reports, our work is reviewed every time we submit an article for publication, or apply for a grant, a publication subvention or a sabbatical leave.

The most concerning possible outcome of the introduction of PTR at MUN is the effective end of academic freedom. The need constantly to demonstrate – and re-demonstrate – how one satisfies inherently subjective criteria of performance inevitably creates incentives to make intellectual choices in service of administrative, rather than scholarly, goals. What faculty member would undertake a novel, long-term program of research with uncertain (but exciting) prospects when the need register annual “deliverables” – grant dollars, publications, etc. – is ever-present? What instructor wouldn't feel pressure to pander to student preferences – adapting standards and choosing topics to safeguard enrollments – rather than risk the opprobrium of administrators?

Finally, academic freedom is not simply the freedom to set our own research course. As both our own Collective Agreement (Clause 2.04) and the [Canadian Association of University Teachers](#) recognize, it also includes the freedom to discuss and criticise policies and actions of the institution, its administration, and the system in which we work. How ready will we be to express concerns about the priorities of our University, our faculty or our home departments if we are constantly concerned with the next review?

Academic freedom is the condition for collegial governance in its true sense. It is what enables faculty to make the daring choices in the classroom and in their scholarship that rightly justifies the existing system of tenure. MUNFA is fighting hard to defend it.