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## Rank and Tenure

Most universities the world over exhibit somewhat corresponding ranks among their faculties.¹ Pennsylvania maintains, for most of its full-time and certain of its part-time staffs, the conventional American brackets of instructor, assistant professor, associate professor, and professor. Junior personnel who are still graduate students, but who perform tasks ranging from reading papers to teaching sections of general courses, are termed assistants or assistant instructors. All these ranks except "full professors" may anticipate advancement: they are "on the academic ladder."

Provision is also made for special services by staff members who are not in line for advancement. The first such category is that of "lecturers"; that is, mature scholars who come in to the University on a limited time or course basis. A second type is that of "associates" who are permanently engaged in the routine teaching of certain general courses.<sup>2</sup> These individuals may have begun work as instructors; if so, they stepped (or were eased) off the ladder at some early point in their careers.

In some universities, minor distinctions or subdivisions are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>E.g., the American ranks correspond roughly with the English professor, reader, senior lecturer, and junior lecturer; and the three upper ranks with the German professor ordinarius, professor extraordinarius, and privat dozent.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The term "associate" is occasionally used for other purposes in certain colleges. In the School of Medicine, e.g., the title is that of a rank midway between instructor and assistant professor.

made within the four standard ranks noted above. The most obvious illustration is the creation of a super-class of "distinguished" or name-professorships, which is accorded a higher salary scale as well as special titles. The purpose here is to recognize outstanding merit.

Although this arrangement must please recipients, it seems to us an undesirable one and we are glad to observe that it does not exist at Pennsylvania. In creating super-professors ordinary professors are almost automatically demoted to second-class status—even though there is no such intent. In a word, there is a subtle debasement of the title which is usually recognized as most honorable throughout the world. In effect, also, super-professorships provide a fifth rank, and there is no clear need for increasing the number of rungs on the academic ladder.<sup>3</sup>

There are those, indeed, who would abolish all academic ranks in the name of democracy. It is held that such gradations, however desirable in military or ecclesiastical circles, introduce distinctions which are unfortunate within a "community of scholars." And in conformity with these views a number of independent arts colleges, notably Sarah Lawrence and Bennington, have done away with all ranks.

Although one can sympathize with the idealism behind such actions, there are potent reasons for avoiding similar arrangements at Pennsylvania. For one thing, what may "work" in a small, independent college will not necessarily do so in a large institution. In the latter, distinctions in salary, tenure, and senior influence would probably survive

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> The distinguished-professorship category is not to be confused with individual, endowed professorships which carry a special name. Some persons who hold such chairs seem to cherish the titles, but any subtle distinction involved is often an accidental one—depending on what professor is available for the field to which a chair happens to be assigned.

even if titles were given up, and the only outcome would be the loss of convenient labels for persisting realities.

Even if these realities could be changed, moreover, the results would be dubious. Something might be gained for equalitarian comradeship if the "caste system" were really abolished. But much would be lost if there were no incentives to formal advancement: all social orders seem to need the motivations provided by "climbing a ladder."

In any case, the term "caste system" is an exaggerated one in the academic context: it implies a rigidity of levels which does not exist. Even the younger men interviewed at Pennsylvania showed no resentment against ranks as such. As in any guild, occasional irritation is lessened by the expectation of one's own advancement.

The chief moral which a university may draw from protests against rank is that senior men should limit distinctions to those necessary for effective operations. The more they treat junior associates as colleagues rather than as inferiors, the better it will be for the latter's morale and therefore for a department as a whole. The degree to which a senior man "throws his weight around" or "pulls his rank" on others is partly a matter of temperament, and so is not fully subject to control. But behavior of this sort can be discouraged by other seniors, and also by such formal arrangements (concerning the role of junior men in departments) as have already been suggested.

The only bracket whose abolition might be considered at Pennsylvania—that of "associate" as defined above—is really a status rather than a rank. This status has apparently been found useful in the teaching of large, relatively elementary classes—such as those in English composition. Presumably, it is helpful to have an experienced group handle this routine but important work, rather than to draw all teachers from the

pool of short-term instructors or assistant instructors. Departments may also have found that certain persons can do this elementary work well, even though they lack the ambition or originality which would merit advancement. Hence such men remain associates indefinitely, acquiring de facto tenure by length of service.

The teaching involved here pertains more to secondary than to higher education. Sometimes it even includes "remedial" courses which are clearly on the high school level. Associates thus function as second-class staff within a university environment, and therein lies the rub. Should a university harbor faculty members who are permanently unfit for advancement, however useful their services may be on a sort of secondary school level?

Questions may also be raised as to how helpful such staff really are. Granting that they originally exhibited the abilities desired, can their morale be maintained indefinitely while advancement passes them by? As one critic put it years ago, speaking of the place of "associates" in any university: "They are lodged in this vermiform appendix and expected to keep fresh and sweet there, while their contemporaries rise to chairs and full professorships." 4 Yet professors at Pennsylvania in departments concerned stated that associates did become reconciled to their lot and served a useful purpose.

The problem of associates is a troublesome one and is not peculiar to Pennsylvania. A Harvard committee, discussing it in 1956, stated that a special title was desirable in such routine work as the management of laboratories or "language teaching." But they insisted that men receiving it should be able scholars and teachers whose functions were distinct but

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Barzun, Teacher in America, 1945, 200.

highly honorable. The query remains: Can such functions really be made honorable under the circumstances?

If there is no other way of taking care of the elementary courses in question, there is no use debating the matter. But we would record our opinion that the existence of a non-promotable group within any department is an inherently unhealthy situation. It can be justified only if all possible efforts to solve the problem (through curtailment of courses or by the use of regular staff) have been made and found wanting.

Conventional faculty ranks are divided, approximately and for most purposes, into junior and senior categories; that is, into instructors and assistant professors on the one hand, and associate and full professors on the other. Matters of age, seniority, and salary enter into this informal division, but the most distinctive factor is tenure. At Pennsylvania, as in most strong institutions, personnel in the senior ranks possess permanent tenure, while those in junior ranks usually do not. Although some of the latter have acquired tenure, the majority of them serve on a probationary basis.

Little need be said about the instructorship other than that it is likely to be crowded out (as an existing rank) as difficulties in finding qualified beginners increase. Such persons will be offered assistant professorships at the start in the competitive appeal for their services. If so, no dire calamity will be involved; but, on the whole, it would be unfortunate if the rank disappeared. If retained, it offers a young person a beginning, full-time trial on a year-by-year basis. In the rare case in which unfitness is soon revealed, the appointee

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Report of the Committee on Appointments, Promotions, and Retirement (Harvard College), March 14, 1956, 19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Hereafter referred to simply as "tenure." The only exception is that, upon recommendation of a dean, the term of a newly-appointed associate professor from the outside may be limited to three years. Statutes, 1955, VIII, 1, c.

has no claim on the institution after one year and this is a real advantage.

If competition for personnel becomes acute, moreover, it may prove desirable to appoint as instructors men who have not yet acquired a degree which would be insisted upon for an assistant professorship. Men should not ordinarily be retained as instructors, however, for more than three years, and never for more than five.

The term for which assistant professors are appointed varies with different institutions, but usually runs from three to five years. At Pennsylvania it is three years, with a possibility of reappointments thereafter for similar terms. Unlike some institutions, the University does not formally grant tenure to assistant professors no matter how long they serve. But the distinction here is not very meaningful, since informal claims to tenure are acquired by anyone who has served an institution continuously in any rank for as much as seven years. Or, to be more exact, such claims are established in all institutions which follow what is now generally considered good practice.

This is not the place in which to discuss the principles of tenure, as these have been developed in American higher education over the past sixty years. But it is now generally recognized that tenure for full-time faculty members above the probationary level is an essential factor in the mainte-

<sup>7</sup> In a recent study of academic tenure, Clark Byse and Louis Joughin (1957), found that 30 percent of the 80 institutions examined gave tenure automatically after so many years of service, while 55 percent accorded it in terms of rank or of years in certain ranks (7).

8 Some institutions give credit toward this seven years for previous service in another college or university. The American Association of University Professors has suggested credit up to three years in this connection.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> I.e., the practice approved by the Association of American College (A.A.C.) and the A.A.U.P. This is not legally binding on any institution, but violations may result in A.A.U.P. investigations or other moral pressures of a serious nature.

nance of academic freedom.<sup>10</sup> And since men cannot be kept indefinitely on probationary status, some time limit has to be set. Beyond this limit, it is assumed that an institution plans to retain them indefinitely and that they are therefore entitled to tenure. Hence the A.A.C. and the A.A.U.P. have adopted the seven-year rule already mentioned.

The implication of this rule for Pennsylvania is that junior staff members should not be reappointed for a total of more than six years' service, unless there is a desire to retain them permanently. Granting this, the question arises: Should the University desire to retain those who are not deemed worthy of promotion? The answer, in our opinion, is clearly no. Yet just such action has been taken in the past in reappointing assistant professors to a third term.

The motives in such cases vary. Least defensible is the simple desire to evade an unpleasant decision. The man is reappointed but not promoted in the hope that he will become discouraged and go elsewhere. Unfortunately, if he is mediocre as the department believes, he will find it difficult to go elsewhere and may become a permanent and unhappy member.

There may have been instances in which a department desired to retain a man as an effective teacher but declined to promote him for lack of creative ability. The "associates" mentioned above are a special case of this sort, but we are speaking here of assistant professors. Men who are kept at this rank as good teachers are almost as apt to become unhappy as are those whose presence is not desired at all. The remedy for the former, however, is simple enough and has already been suggested. Since such cases are rare, reward them with regular advances in rank.

 $<sup>^{10}</sup>$  Nor need we attempt here to define "academic freedom" or to discuss its values: there is a large literature on the subject.

Now and then a department desires to promote a member to an associate professorship but is unable to do so for one reason or another. Desiring his continued services, they then secure his reappointment as assistant professor with *de facto* tenure. This is the most defensible motive for such action, but it also is dangerous unless an opportunity for promotion is anticipated in the near future.

All this adds up to saying that faculties should not be cluttered up with permanent members whom departments will not or cannot advance. Such a situation spells mediocrity or demoralization. It can be avoided only by clear and courageous decisions when members reach in their careers the great divide between non-tenure and tenure status. Ordinarily, this will be at the time when they have completed two terms as assistant professors. They should then either be promoted to "a permanency," or their services terminated with ample notice. Rare exceptions to this "up or out" policy could be made, however, in cases when a promotion desired by a department must be briefly postponed for extraneous reasons.

Some departments may be counted on to enforce such a policy "on their own" or if it is approved by their college faculty. A number of chairmen interviewed stated that, although mistakes had been made in the past, they had now been applying the "up or out" rule for some years. Most of the staff also seem to approve this in principle. Of a random sample of forty arts faculty members of all ranks, only five were opposed to the procedure.

In practice, to be sure, a firm adherence to the "up or out" policy can be difficult for a department. Members are human. The man in question may be liked personally, even

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> But it could be, let us say, after two years as instructor and three as an assistant professor.

though his limitations are recognized, and his friends will be tempted to make allowances. Hence the responsibility of administrative officers is clear. Their relations with the candidate are usually more impersonal, and this is where the retention of limited veto powers is desirable.

The chief source for future "permanencies" should be the assistant professor personnel. In drawing on this through an "up or out" procedure, a reasonable percentage of them—at least forty percent—must secure advancement. Otherwise, incentives will wither and morale decline. If for these or other reasons the assistant professors become a mediocre group, promotions will become even less frequent and a vicious circle will be set in motion.

In view of the vital distinction between non-tenure and tenure status, it has been suggested that universities might operate with only two corresponding ranks: that is, with assistant professors and professors. Instructorships may be largely crowded out by circumstances, and some institutions do get along without associate professorships. The suggestion was not approved, however, by the faculty members interviewed.

Reasons for retaining instructors, if possible, have been mentioned. As for the associate professorship, we share the faculty's opinion that it has its place. If there is no such rank, no formal incentives lie ahead of a staff member after he has been advanced above the assistant professorship. He will then have "arrived" at, say, age forty and will have at least twenty-five years of tenure ahead.

It is no secret that tenure at this stage involves certain risks. Some men tend to "rest on their oars," and the sooner this occurs, the more unfortunate the consequences. There are many hazards to overcome—the temptation to relax after the climb, social diversions, or special activities which may be justifiable in themselves but are really welcomed as diversions. In the end, the "epic does not get written, and the Nobel prize remains unwon." 12

Some faculty members are so industrious and so devoted to creative work that there is no danger of slowing down in later years. But others, despite ability, do just that. For them, the desire to attain a final promotion from associate to full professor between ages forty and fifty can provide just the incentive needed to overcome the risks. This is true, not only because intensive studies are continued through these years, but also because habits of work become more thoroughly fixed and may then persist beyond the final promotion.

We would therefore recommend that, as far as is feasible, the four conventional ranks be retained at Pennsylvania.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Leonard Carmichael, "Laziness and the Scholarly Life," Sci. Monthly, LXXVII (April, 1954), 212.