

Tenure Chase, Part 1: Prehistory

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Foreword

In recent years, the mathematical community has become concerned about the talent drain that occurs when new Ph.D.s cannot find academic jobs that match their expertise, or cannot find jobs at all. Edward Aboufadel's "Job Search Diary," published in *Focus* a few years ago, gave a very insightful account of a new Ph.D. entering the uncertain job market for the first time. However, I have never seen an article that specifically addresses what to expect at the next great hurdle in an academic career, and another point at which a talent drain undoubtedly occurs: the tenure decision. In this series, I would like to remove some of the veil of silence and mystery that surrounds this process, by chronicling my own experience as I sought tenure at Kenyon College, a small liberal-arts college in central Ohio. Although there are many points in the story that are unique to my case, I am making this chronicle public only because I believe that my experience has some valuable lessons for anyone who may be connected with a tenure decision. I hope that junior faculty will learn ways to improve their chances and warning signs to heed seriously. For tenured faculty members, I hope that there will be some lessons on the need to mentor junior faculty and to intervene on their behalf when circumstances require it. Finally, for the mathematical community at large, I hope to provoke some debate about whether the institution of tenure is working in the way that it should, and whether we might be better off without it. In the narrative below, the parts written in italics were written specifically for this article, after all the events recounted had occurred. The parts written in normal text are excerpted from my personal journal, and were written at the time the events occurred. I have removed personal identification wherever possible and have abridged many of the entries, but otherwise the content of the entries has not been altered.

I would like to acknowledge the advice and support of my wife, Kay, not only in preparing this article but also throughout the tenure chase. Without her, this story would have been much less interesting because I would have given up too soon!

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After earning my Ph.D. from Princeton University in 1983, I taught for six years at Duke University. I left when it became clear that I was not going to get tenure. At that time, the Duke math department attached a great deal of importance to research accomplishments. Although I had been awarded a grant from the National Science Foundation in 1987, this was barely enough to "keep up with the Joneses" in a department where, remarkably, every tenure-track faculty member had outside funding in 1988. While at Duke, I gradually grew more interested in the human interactions of teaching, and my enthusiasm for the more solitary work of research lessened somewhat. But there were no rewards at Duke for a commitment to teaching. When I arrived at Kenyon in 1989, I was pleased to find that the quality of teaching was taken vastly more seriously there.

In rereading my diary from my early years at Kenyon, two things stand out: how little I actually worried about getting tenure, and how much I still judged my success on the basis of research, rather than teaching. I didn't worry about the tenure decision because Kenyon had a very high tenure rate in recent years (according to many people, the second reappointment was the most critical review, and the tenure rate was 100% for faculty who got past that point), and because the mathematics department was clearly very satisfied with me. My attitude towards the relative importance of research and teaching was colored by the prevailing view of the mathematical community, that "success" equated to proving theorems. I was soon to find that this was not the prevailing view at Kenyon. The first wake-up call came when I had my second reappointment review in 1992.

5/11/92: On Saturday I received my evaluation from the provost, on which my reappointment and merit raise were based. It was not what you would call glowing, particularly with regards to my teaching, which he described as "uneven." There were some good points made and some specious ones... provost A observed that "the better the student, the better the evaluation." My first reaction was "Duh... What else is new?" That's the way it always was and always will be. But then he made a comment that got me thinking: "That suggests that you need to reach out more skillfully to the weaker students."... I am still very impatient with students who don't make an effort. My philosophy tends to be (to put it charitably), "They're grown up, I'm not their baby-sitter; if they choose not to work hard, they can live with the consequences." I freeze them out, rather than talking with them. To the extent that I do try to make contact with them, it's definitely not "skillful." After the terrible Math 11 exam that I wrote about on April 17, I let the next class out early and said that I would like to talk with each of the people who got below a C. I talked with half of them (the other half weren't in class), and the conversations I had with those three were awkward, embarrassing, and in two out of three cases, quite unproductive.

Even as I write this, though, I wrestle in my mind with the question of how much of a change I can really make. I shouldn't have to be a therapist or a guidance counselor; there are other people at the college who are paid for their ability in those realms. How "skillful" can I reasonably be expected to be in dealing with students who are at the low end of the motivation or maturity scale? I don't know; but evidently the answer is, more skillful than I am at present.

As you can see, the provost's letter raised anew questions about my own competence as a teacher that I had more or less resolved several years ago at Duke. Not that I had stopped being aware of the difficulty of the job or the fact that my personality is in some ways unsuited to it, but basically I have evolved a *modus operandi* which allowed me to feel that I had improved and that I had learned to do the job fairly well. I would say that my confidence is now shaken. I should, perhaps, admit that one reason for the strength of my reaction was that the letter also presented (as is apparently required by the faculty bylaws) "grades" on my performance in three categories: Teaching Excellence: B-; Scholarly Engagement: B; Collegiate Citizenship: B-. Back in my student days I never received grades that low on anything, so, as Kay correctly observed, my pride was wounded.

6/18/92: [I met with] the provost to discuss the findings of my second reappointment review. In general, [the meeting] was positive and supportive. One of the main pieces of information I wanted was how to interpret the "grades" that he gave me. He made two relevant comments. First, everyone who was reviewed was "graded" on the same scale, whether they were up for second reappointment or promotion to full professor. It was no surprise, then, that the grades for those in the former group were somewhat lower than the grades for the latter group. For the college as a whole, the provost said, the median should be considered to be around B; for those in the second-reappointment cohort the median would be lower.

Gradually, I recovered from the shock of the "grades," and later events reinforced my impression that they were simply an aberration. There were enough complaints from other faculty members about the grading system, which had just gone into effect that year, that the experiment with grades was abandoned after 1992. Moreover, I received the following news a year later that made me feel as if getting tenure would be a cinch:

6/18/93: ... Good news came in the mail today. I am going to receive the George Polya Award from the Mathematical Association of America, given each year to the two best expository articles in the College Mathematics Journal... This is the first real public recognition I've gotten for mathematics since I got my NSF grant in 1987, and I'd have to rank it with that as a highlight of my career so far. It's certainly the best thing that I could imagine happening to me now, with a tenure decision coming up next year...

*If the provost only saw fit to award a B to my "Scholarly Engagement," when the MAA judged a part of it to be worthy of a prize, how seriously could I take his other comments? Unfortunately, I failed to grasp that **the important thing in the tenure decision would not be reality but the administration's perception of reality.***

Meanwhile, I continued to work on the real and imaginary deficiencies in my teaching that were found in the reappointment review, but not always with success:

9/4/92: I was pretty dissatisfied with both of my calculus lectures this week. Both times I had to rush at the end of class, which was a specific problem I am trying to overcome this year... I need to learn to pace myself and parcel out the time in a planned way. When I am running out of time I simply don't have enough control over events. For example, in Thursday's class I forgot to give the students a handout even though I brought it to class and wrote on my lecture notes: "DON'T FORGET HANDOUT!" Why? Because I was so rushed that I didn't look at my lecture notes in the last five or ten minutes.

4/8/93: Only six out of thirteen students came to my calculus class. When I mentioned that to Kay, she thought it was outrageous—both that the students would care so little, and that I would let them get away with it [by saying nothing]. So I did something about it. I sent the seven absentees a fairly stern reprimand by e-mail. But when I brought it home to show Kay, she said that ... I should have written it in a concerned, friendly way. Sometimes I feel that the harder I try to do the right thing, the less I succeed in doing it...

One of the provost's comments when I was reviewed for reappointment last spring was, "You need to reach out more effectively to the weaker students."... This is the first time that comment has made sense to me.

I let students miss class because I hate confrontations. I don't like to do things that someone might consider "mean." I don't like to pry into other people's lives because they might think I'm "nosy." I don't like to ask favors because they might think I'm being "unreasonable." I don't like to insist on being listened to because I'm afraid that my audience just doesn't care!

But my students don't know these things. As far as they can tell, I don't care whether they come to class or not.

*But not all my teaching experiences were so discouraging. My wife, Kay, wrote about the following incident in the **Kenyon College Alumni Bulletin**, August 1992:*

You've never lived until you've been awakened at ten minutes till seven in the morning by students phoning to say they want to come over and bring your husband a great rhombicosidodecahedron. You've never lived, that is, in a Kenyon faculty household. I met them at the back door, ushering them in with silent gestures and pointing them toward their unsuspecting mathematics professor. They appeared at his elbow at the breakfast table, nearly causing him to choke on his English muffin. Michelangelo himself could have displayed no greater pride than that with which they presented the great rhombicosidodecahedron. Constructed from graph paper and gouts of glue, it resembled a giant, beveled golf ball. It was their favorite of all the Archimedean polyhedra... "Close interaction between faculty members and students." I've heard it again and again, before we came here and during our years at the College. After the math students presented their treasure and departed, that phrase rose before me, suddenly gaining personal importance...

11/1/92: Kay's article for the *Kenyon College Alumni Bulletin* ... has now been reprinted and is being mailed out to all the high school seniors that the Admissions Office contacts about applying to Kenyon! The reason is not for its mathematical interest, but because of the persuasive argument she makes in favor of small colleges... The president [of the college] told us... that the article had also been popular with the trustees, who kept Kay's boss [the editor of the alumni magazine] busy telling them how to pronounce that long word!

As the school year 1993-4 began, storm clouds gathered over the college, presaging a change in the economic and political climate in which my tenure decision was to be made.

9/30/93: ... [A biology professor] and I continued the discussion with [a history professor and a librarian] over lunch. They think that the president's reign has passed through three eras... In the last few years [the third period], ... the president has lost hope of professional advancement and become more fiscally conservative, and the librarian said that she thinks he's even a little bored. The results of this are visible in the zero faculty growth, lack of support for grants, lack of real leadership on the science building, and the remarkable hysteria this year over the fairly modest shortfall in the number of students.

11/12/93: Yesterday the provost dropped the biggest bombshell from the administration that I have heard of since I came to Kenyon. Because of the financial hardship caused by the shortfall in enrollment, they (he and the president? or maybe just the president?) have decided to cut back on the number of faculty next year, in order to save money. This is going to be done by "suspending" several positions temporarily: not hiring replacements for faculty going on leave or retiring.

11/21/93: The decision was swift and unfavorable. On Thursday morning... the chairman of the mathematics department [referred to henceforth as "the chair"] got the word from the provost that the math department will have to make do with five professors next year [instead of the normal six].

*That fall also marked the publication of **Alma Mater**, a book by Kenyon alumnus P. F. Kluge, who returned to campus to teach and live for a year. A central theme of his book was what he called the "every kid a winner" syndrome, the gradual erosion of standards that leads to grade inflation. It also leads, in his opinion, to a situation in which an unacceptably high proportion of faculty members were receiving tenure. Much later, a member of the College's senior staff told me, "I think that book really got under [the president]'s skin."*

In spite of the warning signals that this might not be a good year to be coming up for tenure, I remained blissfully optimistic about my chances. In April, the hints became a good deal more direct, and my denial of reality shifted into overdrive. The next entry takes place just after the mathematics department finished undergoing a review by two external evaluators.

4/6/94: ... The chair reported to me separately a minor point that came up in the discussion [between him, the evaluators, the president and the provost]... The evaluators reported on their meeting with the students on Monday night—which, incidentally, was very well attended, with about 25 students. There were glowing praises of three of the other professors in the department but after they were finished the president pointed out that they hadn't said anything about Mackenzie, and wondered if there was any reason for that. The chair said the question surprised one of the evaluators, who replied that there hadn't been any comments either positive or negative about me. I tend to put a fairly neutral construction on this observation and the president's question. There were no comments on me because the meeting was mostly for math majors and minors, and I just haven't taught very many of them this year (only two)... The president asked because he know I am up for tenure and this was another good source of information. Of course, more insidious meanings can also be read into this exchange.

4/11/94: On Friday the chair had a mysterious meeting with the president and the provost. We figured it had something to do with the evaluation, but after the meeting he said it had not been about what he expected, and he was “sworn to secrecy.” I have a wild guess. What would the administrators want to tell him about so urgently, so secretly, and so close to Honors Day? My hunch is that either Professor H or Professor S is going to win a Trustees’ Teaching Award, and the administrators were letting him know so that he can make sure that they come to the ceremony.

4/21/94: My hunch about Honors Day turned out to be wrong. The winners of the Trustee Awards were... Not Professor H or Professor S. Too bad. I don’t know how they determine the winners of those awards, but clearly it’s not by polling the math students.

4/24/94: The course of my life over the next several years has already been decided, but I do not know the decision yet. The trustees of Kenyon College had their spring meeting this weekend, at which they decide who gets promotions and tenure. I will receive a letter in the mail tomorrow, telling me either that I have received or been denied “Appointment Without Limit” (the official term for tenure). Until two or three days ago, I did not lose any sleep over the decision, but then it occurred to me that the mysterious meeting [the chair] had with the president and provost may have been for them to give him advance warning that they were not going to recommend me for tenure. That thought caused me to lose, well, perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes of sleep. I’m a very sound sleeper.

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