

The Tenure Chase Papers

[The Tenure Chase Papers](#) was published in *Starting Our Careers* (American Mathematical Society, 1999), pp. 79-100. But why wait for the book? You can read it right here!

Of all the articles that I have published, “The Tenure Chase Papers,” a memoir about my candidacy for tenure at Kenyon College, is in a category by itself. I have gotten far more reader feedback on it than any other article I have ever written. The website www.phds.org called it “required reading for all academics and would-be academics.”

“The Tenure Chase Papers” is a tale that is full of unexpected twists and turns and good lessons for young professors on the tenure track. It draws back the veil of secrecy surrounding the most critical career hurdle for anybody in academia. It sometimes seems taboo to speak of tenure, but when things are left unspoken, lessons are left unlearned.

Though it may be restating the obvious, I'd like to point out that the events described in this memoir happened quite a long time ago. Kenyon College reformed its tenure system after I left. The mathematics department hired several young, vibrant teachers who have brought a new energy to the place. Several of them are good friends of mine. Also, in the bigger picture, the tenure decision did absolutely no harm to my career. It was directly responsible for my becoming a freelance writer rather than continuing as a university mathematics professor. That career has been more rewarding than I could have imagined. So please, no sympathy cards required!

I still think that there are very serious questions about the wisdom of the tenure system. Does this all-or-nothing hurdle make sense in the modern world? Suppose we concede for a moment that universities should grant tenure only to faculty who are truly outstanding in every way. Why should the penalty for being not-quite-outstanding be that you are essentially fired? I don't know any other profession that conducts its business in such a self-defeating way.

(In addition, the decision is often influenced by other considerations than merit, and it is often made by people who do not have full information about the candidate. Read “The Tenure Chase Papers” if you have any questions on this point!)

However, I did not write the memoir as a polemic. Whether you like the tenure system or hate it, I hope that my article will make you think about how we arrive at these crucial decisions, and I hope that it will remind you that transparency is better than secrecy for all concerned.

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