

# Reflections on Equity in Scholarship, Service, and the Tenure and Promotion Process

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As faculty and higher education institutions consider strategies and expectations for a successful tenure and promotion process, we must also consider the broader institutional culture that is often heavier and more costly for minoritized (or underserved) individuals moving through the T&P process, or whose creative work and research is nontraditional. In this short paper, I will consider three areas: 1) methods of creative work and research that can be viewed as non-traditional; 2) the increasing pressure (perhaps especially at smaller or less wealthy institutions) to engage in service work; and 3) the tenure and promotion process itself, which may be in contradiction to diversity, equity, and inclusion. While I do offer specific takeaways, I will mostly advocate for all of us to start or join conversations that need to be happening in departments, colleges, and faculty governing bodies. This paper is based on remarks made at the October 2021 Conference for Assistant Professors organized by the Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence and the Office of the Provost at Purdue University.

## Creative Work and Research

I am an Associate Professor of Art at Valparaiso University (Valpo), a small, private, Lutheran, tuition-dependent institution in the Midwest. At Valpo, teaching is the primary role of the faculty, although research and creative work are an important part of tenure and promotion. I will use my own creative work and research to illustrate the way in which legitimate scholarship can be called into question because it is interdisciplinary in nature, or because it does not strive for narrow dissemination through peer-reviewed journals.

I co-direct a story collection called the Welcome Project ([welcomeproject.valpo.edu](http://welcomeproject.valpo.edu)) that began as an on-campus project at Valpo where we interviewed students about belonging. It quickly grew to the city – we partnered with nonprofits to help the community better understand what homelessness looked like in Porter County. It then grew again to include a deep look into the declension narrative of Gary, Indiana. We have conducted hundreds of interviews over the past decade, and edited those interviews into short video and audio stories to use in facilitating campus and regional conversations. Our work is also broadcast on Lakeshore Public Radio.

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**Recommended Citation:** Wuerffel, Liz. 2022. "Reflections on Equity in Scholarship, Service, and the Tenure and Promotion Process." *Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence and ADVANCE Purdue Center for Faculty Success Working Paper Series* 5(1): 46-50.

**Acknowledgements:** I would like to acknowledge and thank Professor Mangala Subramaniam for inviting me to the Conference for Assistant Professors where I was able to present a version of this paper, and I give thanks to my fellow panelists for their insightful remarks. I also want to thank my fellow senators and colleagues at Valparaiso University who are conversation partners around several of the topics raised in this paper. James Baldwin said it better, but, in short, we critique because we care.

Here is the problem: this work is not traditional gallery exhibition work that most art departments are looking for in their pre-tenure faculty; it does not easily classify as a solo show, an invitational, or a juried exhibit; and it does not even sit firmly in the discipline, as it blends arts and humanities. This work falls under the framework of *publicly engaged scholarship* – it is participatory, civic, and community-oriented. Publicly engaged scholarship is a framework and method used across different fields that women and faculty of color are more likely to engage in, and it often gets dubbed “community service.” Yet this method is consequential, both in terms of scholarship and in terms of co-contributing alongside community members to the public good – two goals most universities aspire to but do not usually recognize as being able to happen in tandem. Publicly engaged scholars often have to also prove themselves through traditional methods and, even so, can face bias from colleagues and tenure and promotion committee members who view publicly engaged scholarship as unorthodox or even illegitimate.

While I successfully achieved tenure and promotion, I did so and by meeting and exceeding all of the traditional requirements for my field (maintaining a strong exhibition record) in addition to my publicly engaged work. In advance of applying for tenure, I spent time translating the process and impact of Welcome Project creative work and research into art terminology for my department colleagues so that it would not be primarily viewed as service work. Finally, I provided sufficient context in my tenure and promotion documents to alleviate concerns that committee members may have had regarding the appropriateness of counting publicly engaged work as scholarship.

### **Service**

At Valparaiso University, one of the qualities we look for when hiring new faculty is a desire to engage in building community and serving the university campus. While we do try to limit the kinds of service work that pre-tenure and non-tenure faculty engage in during their first few years, as we better recognize the value of non-tenure and pre-tenure perspectives, as budget cuts reduce staff and faculty positions, and as we are called to do more and varied forms of service, service obligations multiply.

At Valpo, we have just under 200 tenure-track faculty members; these faculty by and large (though certainly not exclusively) shoulder the most service, as service is required as part of our tenure and promotion process. During our mascot change, one of the most fitting ideas I heard for the new mascot was “the committee on committees” – we are still tabulating the number of faculty seats on university, Senate, and college committees, but as of now we are up to 520. This does not count departmental committees, or all the other forms of service faculty are called – or required – to do (mentoring, advising, hiring committees, etc.). This level of committee work is unsustainable. Visible effects are more vacant seats, more uncontested elections, and a drop in attendance; less visible effects must include higher stress, fatigue, burnout, and lower morale.

There is an additional burden for many minoritized faculty – I know this from experience as a member of the LGBTQ community, and I notice it even more for our faculty of color. In addition to regular service work, we often get nominated for standing committees that “need diversity” or on search committees that are representative or need to appear representative. We are also called upon to educate the campus community more broadly through panels, events, and student life programming. We become the go-to people who get the email, phone call, or hallway conversation when administrators or colleagues need advice or want to reach a certain student

demographic with which they are not already engaged. Additionally, we routinely become emotional support systems (and sometimes crisis responders) for our BIPOC + LGBTQ students.

All of this is on top of an already overflowing plate. While parts of it may be energizing to some individuals who enjoy educating and advocating for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice, it also comes with an emotional toll that will compound for faculty (and students and staff) in places that lack strong, supportive, and regenerative BIPOC + LGBTQ communities. Additionally, it is work that has little or no value in the tenure and promotion process. In fact, it takes away time from course preparation, creative work and research, professional development, and the types of academic committee work that do not need justifying remarks in one's tenure and promotion application.

### **Tenure and Promotion**

There is mounting evidence that evaluations of teaching (or SETs) are complicated by bias, bias coming from students and in the evaluation tool itself, and that the use of evaluations in employment decisions is discriminatory against underrepresented faculty (Mitchell and Martin 2018). I posit that the vast majority of higher education institutions still rely on student evaluations in tenure and promotion.

Ryerson University's faculty association and university went into arbitration around student evaluations, and the resulting ruling by William Kaplan in 2018 found that many factors skew SET results, "especially personal characteristics ... such as race, gender, accent, age and 'attractiveness'" (6). The ruling also found that it is near impossible to adjust for these biases. "The expert evidence...demonstrates that the most meaningful aspects of teaching performance and effectiveness cannot be assessed by SETs. Insofar as assessing teaching effectiveness is concerned – especially in the context of tenure and promotion – SETs are imperfect at best and downright biased and unreliable at worst" (2018:5).

Despite the persistence of clear and mounting research, academic departments and tenure and promotion committees continue to use student evaluations in the tenure and promotion process (as well as the hiring process). And while some institutions – Valpo included – have revised the evaluations and added language aimed at helping faculty members and chairs best read the evaluation (or, I might argue, read it in the "least worst" way), the fact remains that they play an outsized role in tenure decisions and an even more troubling role in "on the fence" cases or in cases where a decision to terminate is being justified.

Students are not the only people who have bias. Until we look deeply at our tenure and promotion process, from hiring through promotion, we will continue to perpetuate inequities. It is critical that we address this immediately because decisions that are being made in the tenure and promotion process impact the long-term future makeup of the institution, in essence ensuring that Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) remain PWI. It is a subtle way that racism, sexism, homophobia and other isms can continue to shape the institutional identity in ways that not only harm the people in them (or who are rejected by them), but, potentially, the very survival of the institution itself.

## What to Do

If you are at an institution that is not yet moving the needle, one of the first steps is to begin a departmental conversation to discuss the role of service in tenure and promotion, and to revise tenure and promotion guidelines regarding what scholarship and publication methods are deemed legitimate and desirable. Codify definitions and establish criteria for documentation and evaluation to be used in faculty review processes. Methods like publicly engaged scholarship ought to be recognized, even as such methods question the allure of Tier 1 publications or venues. Such publications are reputable for a reason, but the gatekeeping has also been akin to neighborhoods with racially restrictive covenants, whether intentional or not. We need to enter into honest conversations about the importance of broadening our disciplinary definitions of scholarship. By broadening, I do not mean less deep – publicly engaged scholarship goes deep, tends to leave fewer people out, and tends to meaningfully engage many more people. For pre-tenure, tenure, and promotion, this may also mean expanding review processes to be inclusive of community members who may have more insight on the public impact of engaged scholarship activities than faculty members. It also means developing institutional capacity to support such projects just as traditional scholarship is supported; this may include identifying, expanding, or creating publication opportunities for publicly engaged scholarship at university presses, especially at R-1 institutions where the “publish or perish” mentality is deeply engrained.

Regarding student evaluations, depending on your institution, it may be a departmental-level conversation or a college- or faculty-wide conversation, depending on who holds the reigns of evaluations. But it goes much deeper than the evaluation tool itself. Research shows that bias may decrease with better representation of minority groups in the university workforce (Fan et al., 2019). Yet, minoritized faculty often begin in more vulnerable positions; our institution provides an example. We had been working hard to hire more underrepresented (or minoritized) faculty and had been modestly successful. We have had some faculty of color leave by choice, but due to a recent and dramatic budget cut and because of the protections of tenure, many pre-tenure faculty lines were cut. Because we had spent the last decade hiring more faculty of color, these cuts were even more devastating for our faculty of color.

Ultimately, this means we also must engage in a conversation about tenure. Academic freedom is essential. Job security is a byproduct of safeguarding academic freedom, and that means that in times of major budget cuts and financial crises, the privilege of that job security makes those of us with tenure in part culpable. If we want to advocate for underrepresented faculty, then we have to question the privileges inherent to tenure, because tenure has reproduced inequity. In advocating for underrepresented faculty, how do we protect academic freedom while also protecting emerging faculty – the most diverse group of faculty yet, and the future of our institutions?

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