

CCAS case study for inclusion in the Department Chairs Seminar

A Case of Tenure Denial

It is faculty evaluation season at Comprehensive State University, and the Department of Geosciences' Promotion and Tenure Committee, a body composed of all tenured faculty members, has voted to deny promotion and tenure to Dr. Susan Stalwart. Dr. Stalwart has a stellar record as a teacher, particularly in the large enrollment sections of Physical Geology, and she recently received a university-wide teaching medal that is awarded by students. Her service record is satisfactory for a junior faculty member. The committee vote was close (5-3) and was largely based on strong disagreements about Stalwart's research. Although the number of articles published during her probationary period meets the departmental criteria for promotion and tenure, some committee members argue that her co-authored geology publications should not count because she played a secondary role that was not significant. In addition, they take issue with the fact that two of her first-authored publications are in geoscience education, rather than her specialty area within the discipline. The latter publications results from an NSF Course, Curriculum, and Laboratory Improvement grant on which she is PI. Although the committee's deliberations are intended to be confidential, word quickly leaks to the other junior faculty members in the department, who are appalled and upset that Stalwart has been denied tenure. As a group, they express grave concerns about the manner in which the criteria have been applied and worry that, if Stalwart does not meet the standards, surely neither do they.

Just six months into her tenure as department chair, a position for which she was externally recruited, Dr. Anna Lytical is in a difficult situation. Citing the fact that her prior annual reviews have been positive, Stalwart has decided to appeal the tenure and promotion denial, which requires a determination by the chair whether to uphold or overturn the decision by the Promotion and Tenure Committee. As someone who was recruited from a research university, Lytical has not yet garnered a sense of her institution's expectations for advancement, but her own assessment is that Stalwart meets the criteria as specified in the department's evaluation policy. However, she finds the prospect of overturning the majority vote of her colleagues to be a daunting one, as she is new to a leadership role and actively establishing her credibility in the position. She knows the geosciences department has had a spotty record with regard to recruiting and retaining female faculty members (Lytical's appointment made her only the second tenured woman in the unit). Should she support the committee decision or the candidate's appeal?

Questions:

- 1) The committee's decision to deny promotion and tenure focused on Stalwart' research. Based on the information provided, how strong is the rationale for denial?
- 2) Is there evidence that the criteria for advancement are being applied inappropriately by the committee? If so, what is it?
- 3) Is there an indication in the scenario of gender bias? If so, what is it?
- 4) What strategies might Lytical utilize in responding to the appeal that are mindful of her need to establish credibility?
- 5) Addressing the consternation of the junior faculty will be important to their morale and retention. What steps might Lytical take to mitigate the negative impact of the committee decision on these individuals?

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