

The Post-Tenure-Review Blues

Thomas C. Reeves

Jeff Hamilton knew he was in trouble. The memo from the Chancellor's office summoned him to a post-tenure review meeting with the Dean of Arts and Sciences, the Department Chair, and four faculty members from other departments. Jeff had learned of the new program a week earlier, not long after the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that post-tenure review policies were in place or being developed at public institutions in 37 states. He was the first at Damp Valley State to be put through the wringer.

The memo set a date for Jeff's appearance before the Committee to Reappraise All Performance (CRAP). Certain charges were to be made, it continued, and the faculty member would be given the opportunity to respond briefly to each. Thereafter, Committee members would reach findings about the case and make formal recommendations to the Chancellor. The memo said nothing else. Jeff found himself sweating profusely.

Jeff had received his doctorate in history ten years earlier at Indiana University. He came to Damp Valley because it was the only job offer he had. He secretly thought he was hired because he claimed in the convention interview to be one-quarter Puyallup Indian, and the campus was struggling to achieve diversity quotas. Perhaps, he now thought, investigators had discovered this falsehood and were prepared to dismiss him. Still, the fact that he was tall, lean, blond, and blue-eyed had failed to trigger suspicions during the past decade. He feared that there were more serious allegations involved in the summons.

During his decade at the Gary, Indiana campus, Jeff had worked hard to fit in. It wasn't easy at first because of the intellectually demanding nature of his graduate study. He was also cursed with a conscience.

Damp Valley had been created by the famed educational consultant Throckmorton P. Wallow with the intention of establishing an open-admissions campus that freely granted degrees with the least possible amount of exertion by students and faculty alike. In short, Damp Valley was just a slight exaggeration of the average college and university in America since the 1960s. "D.V." (or as some detractors called it, "V.D.") had prospered and grown as

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word spread across the country among young people who lacked the energy to learn a trade or join the Army. The atmosphere on campus could be described as studied lassitude (the only study, in fact, taken seriously), and new faculty members had to adjust or go elsewhere.

Jeff had learned quickly that Damp Valley faculty members were required to give high grades and keep course requirements at the barest minimum. They were also, at all times, to be compliant and ebullient, especially in the presence of administrators and their husbands. Veteran faculty members told Jeff that the quickest way to get in trouble, outside the classroom, was to land in jail or try to appear in any way distinguished.

Determined to succeed and stay in his profession, Jeff labored to dumb down his classes and treat every student as a Rhodes Scholar. He smiled perpetually. He expressed constant delight about the campus, even helping out recruiters on street corners, county fairs, and detention centers. He spent much of his time on campus in committee meetings, nodding politely at whatever was said and voting in a way that he knew would please his superiors. (He had seconded the nomination of Ray Charles to be a commencement speaker, knowing that the Chancellor, Yip Kim, was a really big fan of the blues singer.) And during each of the graduation ceremonies, for ten years, he had kept a straight face when the diplomas were handed out.

Jeff, to his knowledge, had slipped up only once. In his first year, over drinks at a party, he had expressed doubt to a colleague about the intrinsic value of a new course in "Disc Jockey Technology." He quickly changed his mind, however, when angrily confronted the next day by an assistant to the Assistant Vice Chancellor, who had heard rumors of his discontent. Becoming almost hysterical during the condemnation, Jeff offered to teach the course himself, emphasizing recent innovations in rap and hip hop. His sin was apparently forgiven, as faculty members began speaking to him again within the month.

By his fourth year, Jeff appeared to be in good standing. If he had few friends on campus, he was without any known enemies. His student ratings were high. He had published nothing, a prerequisite for tenure at Damp Valley. ("Our focus must always be on our students," Wallow had taught, prompting several lascivious professors to take the pronouncement more seriously than it was intended.) His course "The Historical Quest of Harry Potter" was a hit with students, and photos of Jeff in a Potter costume had made the Gary newspaper. Jeff had even told a few administrators, quietly and quite off the record, that he envied them and hoped one day to reach the exalted state in which they languished. He bathed in their condescending smiles.

Tenure was granted in his sixth year of service. Associate Professor Hamilton was delighted to have lifetime job security, even at Damp Valley. A couple of his graduate school buddies sniggered, but one was unemployed and the other was a low-paid ad-hoc, driving between several campuses famous for their vast endowments, so he didn't envy them. When notice of his tenure arrived, Jeff

felt so good about life that he skipped a meeting of the committee on gymnasium floors to celebrate in his tiny apartment with a bottle of Peach Snapple.

But four years later, he was staring at his summons to appear at a post-tenure review. What had gone wrong? Where had he failed? Not once, that he recalled, had he revealed an interest in anything normally thought to involve academic excellence. True, he was once discovered in the library doing research. But he told the inquisitor that his work was only genealogical in nature and involved his grandmother. True, several students over the years had received a "C" in his class "Madonna as American Icon," but only because they had skipped all of the movies and cook-outs. He had once gone to a historical convention in New Orleans, but he assured curious colleagues that he did not attend a single scholarly session and had spent all of his time partying in the French Quarter.

In short, Jeff Hamilton had been true to the spirit of Damp Valley for ten years. He had made a science of unproductive obsequiousness. Why was he now under suspicion and perhaps in danger of losing his job?

On the day appointed, Jeff was ushered into a chair in the center of a large room, facing Committee members, who were seated behind a long table. He remembered seeing a setup like this in a film about the House Un-American Activities Committee. Only he, unlike the witnesses during the Red Scare, was without benefit of counsel. The thought occurred to him that he was being investigated for Un-Wallowian Activities, and he wondered if a blacklist could be formed to keep people from being hired in colleges and universities that no respectable academic would want to work in anyway.

Dean Sheila Botfly chaired the meeting. Her stern bearing and fierce glare reflected a lifetime devoted to the martial arts and the science of marital counseling. Jeff's department chair, Frederica (Fred) Frog-Spawn, seemed unusually cool as the proceeding opened. Just two weeks earlier, Jeff recalled, Fred had thanked him profusely for helping her paint her house.

The Dean opened her remarks by assuring Jeff that all tenured faculty would be summoned by the committee, and that the process would be repeated every three years. This was all part of an effort, she assured him, of helping the campus to keep its employees up-to-date, popular, and responsive to the needs of the campus. "No one is entitled to a job," she said. "It may be that some of you," she chortled subtly, "will be asked to move on." Jeff shuddered visibly, prompting a slight smile from an assistant professor of Sport Psychology seated behind the table. Seeing the response, Jeff thought to himself how closely the woman physically resembled John Madden.

The allegations, said the Dean solemnly, involved sexism, racism, and administrative neglect. Jeff felt his heart hit the floor; his troubles were worse than he had imagined. Struggling to remain calm, he said nothing.

The sexism charge, the Dean said, had come from the Womyn's Center on campus and contained two counts. The first involved speech. It was alleged

that in his class on Feminism in World War Two Shipyards, he had used the words “foreman,” “manhole,” and “fellowship.” He had also once referred to his Department Chair as a “Chairperthing.” These were serious charges, the Dean said. “What have you to say for yourself,” she asked in an almost shrill voice.

Jeff sputtered a profuse apology about the three controversial words, saying that it had never crossed his mind that he was offending women, and that he himself was an ardent feminist. As for his reference to Chair Frog-Spawn, he plead that he was only trying to avoid the “son” in “Chairperson.” (He remembered that one daring colleague had refused to say Chair and referred to Fred in private as a Stool, but he kept that to himself.) The committee members seemed unmoved.

The second count lodged by the Womyn’s Center centered on Jeff’s willingness to sign up as the faculty adviser for a Men’s Club on campus. The Men’s Club, by definition, said the Dean, was sexist. Jeff managed only a brief reply, saying that since the women on campus were organized he thought it harmless for the men to do likewise. The Dean glowered, and Estralita Gonzalez-Washington, an associate professor of educational psychology, frowned and began scribbling notes. Jeff thought he could feel his underwear getting wet.

The racism charge had been filed by a student who had taken Jeff’s “Cowgirls and the Turner Thesis” course, contending that the professor had failed to note that at least 50 percent of all cowgirls had been black. Jeff stammered slightly while making his apology for failing to know that. He had only been given a few weeks to prepare the course, he added, and would certainly not make the mistake a second time. And besides, he added, everyone in the course received an “A”. The Dean was unimpressed. “I seem to be seeing a pattern here,” she said, while slowly fingering a long black letter opener that seemed to Jeff to be a dagger.

There were two administrative charges, said the Dean. One was the failure to turn in student evaluations for two classes. “How are we to know if you’re any good as a teacher,” the Dean asked angrily, “if we lack the necessary proof?” Jeff meekly replied that he had indeed somehow failed in this regard, and he thanked the committee for reminding him of his solemn duty.

The other charge involved the failure to provide an adequate mission statement for a class called “American History in the 1950s.” Jeff wondered aloud what more he could have added, mustering the courage to say “Doesn’t the course title pretty much explain itself?” “We do not appreciate sarcasm, fellah,” said the Dean. “For a man who makes \$60,000 a year, you seem to have many shortcomings.”

Then it dawned on Jeff that the entire proceeding was an exercise in cost-cutting. They wanted his salary. Administrators could hire three ad-hocs with only 10 percent of his annual income. Post-tenure review was about money!

When dismissed, Jeff left the room feeling that his career in higher education had been annihilated. It was just a matter of time until he was begging for

part-time teaching jobs and bagging groceries to keep alive. His great sin at Damp Valley had been to be promoted and grow older. He wished now that he had done something truly defiant, like refusing to sit on the Faculty Senate, one of the most notorious wastes of time known to the human race.

The CRAP Committee filed a written report with the Chancellor, and the Chancellor soon sent a letter to the accused with her decision. Jeff could resign at the end of the semester or he could agree to submit to some “re-education” efforts, designed to turn him into a “well-performing” faculty member. If he chose the latter, he would be required to take a year-long class at the local junior college in writing course goals and syllabuses, write favorable essays on ten books chosen by the Chair of the Black Studies program, and create a list of at least 300 sexist words that he would promise never again to use. In addition, he would be required to teach three more classes in the following year, without additional pay, in reparation for his bad conduct.

Without hesitation, Jeff chose to submit. In fact, he was relieved that there were avenues available to atone for his transgressions. Although he didn’t know it, after a decade in Academic Siberia and the jolting experience before the post-tenure review committee, all of his personal integrity and creative fire had evaporated.

Jeff vowed privately never again to offend anyone by uttering anything that might be thought racist, sexist, or in any way politically incorrect. From now on he would scrupulously avoid all controversy, saying and thinking only what was acceptable on campus. As for historical facts, well, maybe 70 percent of the cowgirls were black. If that made students happy, why not? And as for course descriptions and mission statements, he would be sure to pack them with fashionable references to diversity and multiculturalism. Indeed, he swore to devote the rest of his life to the pursuit of cooperation, especially with his betters in the swank offices in the administration building. He publicly stated that the Chancellor and Dean had been responsive to faculty concerns.

When his sentence had been completed, and he was in harmony with all that transpired at Damp Valley State, Jeff Hamilton knew that he would be at peace with himself. He would at last be a well-adjusted and up-to-date professor. The gulag would be home.