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Faculty 'massacre' blamed on Baylor's confusing tenure criteria

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By Tim Woods

Tribune-Herald staff writer

When the 12 faculty candidates recently denied tenure by Baylor University requested an explanation, they got it: a form letter telling them their research fell short.

- [Comment on this story](#) Three of those candidates are celebrated by the school in posters and display cases across campus for their research. They and others affected by the tenure “massacre,” as one Baylor professor calls it, aren’t the only ones asking questions about the exact standards to earn tenure at the university.

“Given your reduced teaching responsibilities, you have not conclusively demonstrated, in the area of research, that tenure should be awarded by Baylor University,” Baylor Provost Randall O’Brien wrote in the form letter.

One of the 12, information systems professor Robin Wakefield, is named as one of the “Hankamer Professors Making a Name in Research” for her work in e-commerce research. Wakefield’s and a few other professors’ research is touted in a sealed case on the first floor of the Hankamer School of Business at Baylor.

Two others — electrical and computer engineering professor Russ Duren and mechanical engineering professor Carolyn Skurla — are featured in posters on the second floor of Pat Neff Hall, outside the office of Baylor Vice Provost for Research Truell Hyde. The posters read, “Baylor Research: Making a difference” and include the professors’ names and pictures.

Another of the denied professors, Randall Jean, is working to develop a blood glucose sensor that would eliminate painful finger-prick blood tests for diabetics. Colleague Robert Marks, a tenured engineering professor who has worked with Jean on the project, says “the impact (of Jean’s work) will be extraordinary.”

At the heart of the matter: allegations of shifting standards and fuzzy criteria for tenure. Baylor professors — tenured and not — and alumni are seeking answers to this and several other issues related to the tenure process.

However, O’Brien, after speaking to the *Tribune-Herald* about the matter in March, is now referring questions to the marketing and communications office. Baylor regents chairman Harold Cunningham also was unavailable for comment on the mounting tenure controversy.

This spring, 12 of 30 candidates at Baylor were denied tenure. At 40 percent, the denial rate under

President John Lilley was a sharp increase from recent years, according to Faculty Senate Chairman Matt Cordon, a law school professor.

Marks called the tenure denials a “massacre” and said “the administration’s decisions about this year’s tenure swept over Baylor like a tsunami. It was totally unexpected and had an entirely significant body count.”

Several of the 12 — referred to as the “Denied Dozen” on popular Baylor chat Web site BaylorFans.com — say their denials were confounding and the result of tenure guidelines being changed after their tenure notebooks were submitted.

“What President Lilley has done in the last month is to say: ‘I’m holding you to a different standard. I’m not telling you what that standard is, and I’m not giving you prior notice of what it’s going to be,’ ” Baylor biology professor Rene Massengale said in an earlier interview after learning of her denial.

Massengale and several others denied tenure would not comment for this article, as they have begun their appeal process.

In some respects, the appeals process is more of a reconsideration than anything else, yet another point of frustration for faculty candidates trying to win tenure. The appeal is made to the president and the provost who denied tenure in the first place, Cordon said.

Regarding the posters and displays across campus touting some of the professors’ research accomplishments, Baylor spokeswoman Lori Fogleman said they were produced by the school’s marketing and communications office. She noted that her department is separate from the tenure decision-makers.

“It’s our job to find the great stories and what professors are working on . . . and make sure that other people know about those,” Fogleman said.

Fogleman wouldn’t discuss whether a form letter is an appropriate response to a faculty candidate’s request for the reason tenure was denied.

“How we communicate personnel matters is covered by privacy law,” she said. “It’s not only policy at Baylor but it’s law as well, that employees have a right to privacy and we don’t intend to violate that by discussing privacy matters.”

Cordon, the Faculty Senate chairman, said he has a regularly scheduled meeting Friday with O’Brien in which he plans to ask for clarification of how faculty should approach the administration to determine what the tenure criteria are and what they should expect in the process. He said he has been approached by a number of faculty asking questions for which they haven’t gotten answers from the Baylor administration.

Fogleman wouldn’t say whether O’Brien will address such questions from Cordon at the meeting, citing the confidential nature of the meetings.

The tenure controversy is beginning to reach beyond the campus.

Baylor Alumni Association executive vice president Jeff Kilgore said, “The alumni are always concerned with the state of affairs of the university, especially when it comes to academics, and this issue has certainly created a lot of attention and raised a lot of concern among the alumni, chiefly because it has raised a lot of concern among the faculty.”

He added, "The temperature of the faculty is at the heart of it and (the BAA) certainly supports our faculty."

Kilgore said he's heard from a number of alumni on the issue.

"What I understand from my academic colleagues is that this is something that's abnormal, which is causing a lot of calls from alumni asking, 'Is it a good thing or a bad thing?' " Kilgore said.

twoods@wacotrib.com

757-5721

What does tenure mean?

Tenure, for a college or university professor, means job security and is intended to ensure academic freedom.

It is awarded following sufficient showing in areas of research, teaching and publication— usually over a term of five to seven years.

Having tenure protects teachers when they openly speak out on authority, but also is designed to promote new and original ideas in a free-thinking atmosphere. Tenure also is sometimes credited with creating an atmosphere of loyalty, as professors work to improve the school where they will work their entire career.

Criticisms of the tenure system include allowing professors to become lazy, complacent and irrelevant, having been granted so much job security.

A snapshot of the research of a few of the 12 professors denied tenure by Baylor:

Randall Jean, engineering: Developing a prick-free blood glucose sensor that would save diabetics the painful process of drawing blood several times a day. Jean was tenured at Texas A&M University in 1984 and has been at Baylor since 2003.

What others are saying: "Denial of tenure for Dr. Jean will delay the blood sugar research for years, or derail it entirely," said Baylor colleague Robert Marks.

Lori Baker, anthropology: Secured contracts with Mexican government to analyze bone samples from cadavers in Arizona desert and test blood samples of possible relatives at home. She has helped identify over 70 people and return their remains to their families in Mexico and Central America.

What others are saying: "In terms of making a lasting impact, I don't know of anybody who's doing more than she is right now, in terms of identifying people outside this country. She's one of the top anthropology researchers in DNA in this country," said Steve Symes, tenured professor at Mercyhurst College in Pennsylvania, recently awarded lifetime achievement award from the Forensic Anthropology Association.

Rene Massengale, biology: Current work focuses on the role of pathogens in affecting water quality and environmental contamination, as well as researching rapid detection of biological agents in drinking water. She has brought in more than \$1 million in grant money since coming to Baylor in 2001.

What others are saying: "She is, in some ways, laying the foundation for people who will move the

field ahead,” said Robert McLean, tenured biology professor at Texas State University. “She’s doing really good, solid work, looking at more than just numbers of (publications) or grant dollars coming in. It’s my perception that at high-powered places it’s about (grant) money, papers and no red flags for teaching. I think Baylor is a lot more than that, hence my disappointment (in learning of Massengale’s tenure denial).”

Russ Duren, engineering: Works on reconfigurable computing, essentially chips that can be programmed to be a computer. Has done a lot of work on reconfigurable computing for the U.S. government and has updated software for the F-18 Hornet, a military fighter jet.

What others are saying: “The value is in flexibility of computing,” Baylor colleague Marks said. “Clearly it’s on state-of-the-art government vessels. (Duren) has an international reputation in this and was actually called before the National Academies to talk about his work and give his thoughts on what the future of reconfigurable computing will be.”

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