EVALUATING RESEARCH IN FORENSICS: CONSIDERATIONS OF THE TENURE AND PROMOTION PROCESS

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This essay is written from the perspective of one who has been involved in "peer review" as both a faculty member and administrator. In discussing the value of research, the first issue is whether forensics as a field of study is itself valued. That is, whether one should do research on forensics events, or write about debate as either theory or practice, is questioned. While one might wish that such political value judgments were not a part of the process, they may be relatively or even centrally involved in some institutions at the departmental level or beyond. In those instances where there is ambivalence about doing such research, or where such research is held as suspect, a faculty member needs to make a conscious decision about what research he or she engages in. I do not want to be read as saying that a faculty member should avoid such research where the atmosphere is negative. I am of the opinion that untenured faculty should decide what they want to do in full recognition that it may not be highly valued by their own colleagues or by administrators. Life is too short to march to the drumbeat of other faculty or administrators (even though it may mean that one looks for employment elsewhere as a result of the decisions made). A controlling principle underlying the comments in this essay is that faculty should be their own person first, rather than get caught up in the "will this count?" scenario that can dominate one's professional choices. I realize that practical exigencies may make such idealism appear decidedly naive, but at least you have a sense of my own bias.

If one can get beyond the political issues, and find a situation wherein the field of study is accepted on its own merits, there is still a need to be sensitive to developing the strongest possible argument for the intrinsic importance of what one has done. Over time, the central issue that seems to dominate discussions, particularly at the College level (or whatever level one moves to in their institution that is beyond the purview of the department), is: "Is research a part of this person's lifestyle?" That is, if one is promoted, can we be fairly certain that the faculty member will continue to do research as part of his or her professional activities? After all, in promoting a person from assistant to asso-

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ciate status with tenure, one presumes that a promotion to full professor is a strong probability down the road.

How does one "demonstrate" that research is a continuing part of a professional persona? The following considerations are not intended to be exhaustive, but are a representative sampling of the issues discussed in peer, chair, and dean's meetings.

First, are papers presented at regional and national conventions moved through the process toward publication? While this is not a prerequisite for every paper presented, the record should reflect a general movement toward publication, whereby convention presentations represent an initial step. Thus, at tenure time, there is a "pipeline" effect established, so that more recent presentations can be presumed to move into publication review in the future.

Second, is there evidence that the person is becoming increasingly more active in associations, either through service activity or through paper presentation and publication? While it is difficult to pin this down in quantitative terms, the general impression one hopes to convey is that increasing recognition within a field brings with it more invitations to present research or be involved professionally in some facet of the association's activities.

Third, is there a general consistency with which work is being done over time? While the number of projects in a given year will vary widely (and is heavily influenced by teaching load as well as personal factors), what one can look for is the sense that a person has not suddenly put on a major effort to get tenure. Are there major "gaps" in the work level, that are not accounted for by reasonable constraints on one's ability to be productive?

Beyond this central issue, the next major consideration is: What is this person's regional or national reputation, and how does her or his research reflect that? To a degree, this issue is responded to by asking outside evaluators to comment on the significance and value of the research. But, there are additional considerations in making the argument that what one has done is important to one's peers.

If we assume that there is a hierarchy within disciplines with respect to the relative "significance" of publishing in particular journals, an essay in Communication Monographs may "count" as more important than one in the National Forensic Journal. Communication Education, for example, is not going to publish some of the current forensic research being done, irrespective of its quality. The topic, such as a survey of tournament practices or judging styles, may be sound in terms of method, but will not necessarily by viewed as fitting within the "mission" of "Comm Ed." What needs to be made clear, especially beyond the departmental level, is that publishing in a "specialized" or
"small" journal is crucial to one's acceptance and reputation within a "sub-field" of the discipline. Publishing in State Association journals or in specialized forensics journals is appropriate because this is where the work will have the most impact. Research seeks its best audience.

Some research that is conducted, in forensics and in other areas, lends itself to collaboration and multiple authorship. Where this is the case, one needs to be concerned about the "message" conveyed with respect to individual contributions. If a dossier reveals a great deal of co-authored work, and if the person being considered is always or generally the second, third or fourth author, the case is weakened. A natural question that arises concerns what contribution a person has made, and whether that individual has initiated projects, led research, or could be published "on her or his own." In some instances, this has been dealt with in the "author notes" to an essay, where the commentary indicated the respective expertise of the authors, or that each contributed equally to the final product. This is fine at the departmental level, where there is a chance that the work will be reviewed, but is not a good strategy beyond the department. College review committees and/or Deans may not actually read your research. Three strategies are important. First, indicate in the promotion document what expertise is contributed. For example, some individuals become second or third authors in bringing methodological sophistication to the research project. That has value in its own right but needs to be clarified for the person at one or more levels above the department. Second, where several studies are done with colleagues, vary the authorship so that one person is not always second or third. Third, do independent research in addition to collaborative work.

More significant than the issue of multiple authorship, in the opinion of some reviewers, is the presence or absence of a "research program." In many cases, this reflects a bias that presumes that one sets out on a scientific quest, with a carefully designed series of studies that will, increasingly, focus attention on a subject and yield ever more useful results. Because many of our studies do not follow this pattern (or any discernible program), it may be necessary to address the issue in explicit fashion: What is there about the research done that reflects central issues, themes, or questions? If there are multiple issues or themes, how might the work be grouped? Does the work reflect a transition or change form a concentration in one area to that in a different area? For many, what is at issue is whether or how the research reflects a particular expertise. If the work represents no central theme, and seems to assume a mastery of several different research paradigms, historical epochs, or whatever, it may raise questions about how much "depth" is present. If it appears that such concerns are relevant to reviewers at the
departmental level or beyond, take whatever opportunity is afforded to
address the issue (usually in a commentary on your own work). Outside
reviewers may comment on issues such as coherence or centrality, but
one should not leave the responsibility in their hands alone.

There are other considerations that are important in the process.
For example, it is surprising that some faculty haven't the foggiest idea
that they are making a "rhetorical statement" by the manner in which a
document is prepared. In putting down activities in a vita, for instance,
it is useful to denote which publications are "refereed," and to indicate
that paper presentations are "invited" or "competitive." It also is useful
to separate publications, paper presentation, book reviews, invited on-
campus lectures, invited lectures at other institutions, etc. By "lump-
ing" all these together as if they were all equal importance, one conveys
a message that may be misleading. Putting events in chronological
order seems obvious but is not always followed.

Thus far, I have written about the evaluation process exclusively in
terms of research. Most of the issues considered are relevant to areas of
research outside forensics. One issue that needs to be noted is that for
coaches, the responsibilities of attending and hosting tournaments is
time-consuming. That time commitment needs to be factored into any
elevation of one's "research productivity." In fact, one could argue that
the activity is analogous to a "performance" in the fine arts. If this is the
case, a central question that many will ask is: "How is the quality of this
activity to be judged or evaluated?" There are others in the forensics
community far more capable than I in providing an answer to the ques-
tion. The point that I wish to make is that in using a role as forensics
coach as part of the tenure judgment, this issue needs to be addressed
in explicit fashion.

In coming full circle to the issue of "control" over these and other
professional activities, the best way to achieve tenure is to act tenured.
Although this notion is not original with me, the implication it carries
goes beyond making decisions that serve yourself first. What it suggests
(and I realize the idealism it connotes) is that one does as an untenured
person what one will do as a tenured person.