Academic Labor

IJoC

Confessions of a Reluctant Manager in the Academic Labor System

ANONYMOUS

I did not enter academia to be put in the position of firing people. In fact, managing budgets, preparing staffing reports, doing performance evaluations, and attending human resource briefing sessions all fall under the category of things that I hoped to avoid by becoming a professional educator and researcher. But in my years as department chair, I've found my professional time shift from the life of the mind to the life of the administrative procedure. However, none of those petty annoyances rival the seriousness and impact of the time that I fired one of my colleagues.

Of course, we don't call it "firing"—rather we use the word "review" to describe the way faculty are evaluated as part of the labor market. But the effect is the same: After "the process ran its course" (another euphemism designed to depersonalize our actions), my colleague was no longer employed at my institution by no choice of his own. In this essay, I want to reflect on my own role in the gray area between labor and management in the review process, shining a little light on a central site of academic practice that is kept in the dark for often legitimate legal and ethical reasons—nobody would want to air their departmental dirty laundry publicly, and privacy and confidentiality should be important tenets of any fair workplace. I hope that sharing my experiences can help other chairs feel a bit less lonely in the process, although all of our institutions and departments are different enough that I'm sure every tale is fairly unique. For faculty reading this who may find themselves on the receiving end of such reviews, perhaps knowing how a chair approached a case might help them gain perspective on the human dimension of such administrative procedures.

The story you're about to read is true, but the names have been changed to protect the innocent. My colleague—let's call him Max—was a complicated hire. The position covered an area in my department that was distinct from the rest of the faculty in terms of the type of work that would comprise his tenure case, and we had never had a tenure-track faculty member in this subfield before. While he was the unanimous choice of the department and dean, it was more due to a weak field of finalists than to Max's clear strength, as the final choice was between offering the job to Max and aborting the search for the year. For both political and practical reasons, we felt that it was essential to hire someone into the position: There were no guarantees that we'd be approved for another year's search or that the subsequent applicant pool would be stronger, and we needed to staff a recent expansion in our program. I remember saying in a search committee meeting that in the worst-case scenario, Max would fail his third-year review and we could try again with a better sense of what we were looking for. At the time, we knew Max would be a risky hire, but we all saw potential that he could grow into the position and adapt to our

institutional needs and goals. But if I could send a message back to my novice self taking over the departmental reigns, I'd warn that the "worst-case" option of dealing with the short-term aborted search would have been far preferable to the emotional tumult of trying to mentor and review a colleague who really did not belong here. So, if you find yourself hiring someone about whose capabilities as a colleague you have serious doubts, think twice about putting yourself in a position to oversee a future failed review. And if you find yourself hired, remember that no matter how optimistic your future colleagues might be about your future, their commitments are to the long-term stability of the department and institution, and it is hoped, to making you part of that tradition.

Every institution has different configurations for chairs and administrative responsibilities—at mine, chairs are almost always internally appointed from a department's tenured faculty; the position has a minimal course release and small stipend, but otherwise, it's an additional set of duties on top of your already significant teaching, research, and service expectations. Our chair appointments rotate among senior faculty, so unless one is known as a particularly incompetent administrator or has a well-publicized personality disorder, everyone will get the chance to serve a sentence as chair. However, in a smaller department like my own, demand exceeds supply of senior faculty, so we're tapped repeatedly to step up and serve.

While many chair responsibilities have strict deadlines for reporting information and making decisions, they do not come with the requisite time to make them a priority in your daily professional (and personal) life. So, I've found that being chair is a constant game of triage and damage control, figuring out what absolutely needs to happen and the minimal time needed to cross it off my to-do list.

Mentoring junior colleagues is certainly among the most important and potentially rewarding chair-related tasks—although certainly all senior faculty members can be potential mentors, only a chair has it written into his/her job description. Mentoring colleagues, like teaching, features an array of goals and strategies. Sometimes, it's about supporting and encouraging what's already working well, building confidence within a system often featuring few positive reinforcements. Sometimes, it's about being a sounding board, offering feedback to a thoughtful teacher or researcher looking to try out new possibilities. And sometimes, it's remedial, focused on isolating weaknesses and suggesting solutions. Although these are all important aspects of the mentoring process in theory, they become challenging for the chair in practice—mentoring is an amorphous time commitment, without the immediate relief of crossing off a required set of forms or meetings from my to-do list. Thus, in the temporal triage of being chair (and full-time faculty), mentoring becomes a more reactive task, taking time to answer questions and helping colleagues learn how to navigate departmental and institutional expectations.

Being a chair is an awkward blend of colleague and supervisor. Even when I proactively reached out to Max to see how things were going, the awkwardness of our relationship impeded a fully successful mentoring situation: He knew full well that I would be in charge of his review in his third year, and thus I was simultaneously trying to help him succeed and judging his performance. On the one hand, this is an asset, as I could help him read the tea leaves of what was truly important for his success and what might be viewed as a distraction; this dual role has worked with other junior colleagues and also served me well in my own pre-tenure days being mentored by a previous chair. But with Max, I felt like he was often being less than honest with me about what was happening with his classes and research, knowing that I would be logging any issues in my notes as potential items to raise in a review. Of course, what I was

really trying to gauge was how he resolved problems and learned from his inevitable mistakes, not his ability to do things perfectly the first time, but his anxieties as a junior faculty member prompted him to present his own experiences in the most positive direction, rather than allowing us to openly discuss how improvements might be made.

By the end of his first year, I felt a shift in our relationship: It seems that he'd come to see me more as a skeptic that needed to be convinced of his viability as a faculty member than as a mentor striving to help him succeed. However, he did not know that I had become his vocal defender jn discussions with our other senior colleagues. During his first year, every tenured member of my department came to me individually to express concerns with things they'd seen or heard about Max's classroom or departmental performance. My reaction was both to reassure them that I was aware of and addressing those issues with Max and to inform them that I had seen other positives that gave me confidence for his continued growth and development. Yet Max seemed to see me more as an obstructer to his goals than as a mentor helping him achieve them; we began to butt heads on mundane matters like scheduling classes and purchasing materials and equipment. Likewise, in a conflict between Max and a staff member in my department, I negotiated between the two to seek a compromise that would allow them to do their jobs effectively, placing the needs of our students in the forefront—but to Max, appeared to undermine his autonomy as a faculty member.

This tension made the second and third years of his appointment quite challenging. I felt responsible to the institution, the department, and most of all our students to help Max succeed to the best of his ability in the classroom. But his actions of ignoring advice given to him, resisting mentorship from me or other colleagues, or showing inflexibility about adapting his pedagogical approach to fit the needs of our students became a growing problem. I fully believe that faculty should be free to teach however they feel is most appropriate to their material, students, and personal style. As a visitor to a class, I try to gauge students' understanding and assess teaching strengths on how well the professor's instruction engages the class, not how it conforms to my own pedagogical approach. I visited numerous of his classes, reviewed all of Max's syllabi and evaluations, and had multiple conversations with him about strategies for more successful teaching. However, providing feedback and advice does not guarantee that it will be heeded, as many of the problems I identified (with suggestions on how to overcome them) remained consistent in his classes across semesters. If you choose to disregard a colleague's pedagogical advice about a problem, you need to either put forward another strategy for addressing the underlying issue or make a case for why your approach is actually more appropriate than is the suggested shift. Instead, Max remained constant in most of his pedagogical strategies without justification or improvement. After two years, I began to feel like the time and energy I had put into helping him develop as a teacher were wasted, as he showed little progress or effort to improve, and needless to say, my growing frustration with him as a colleague escalated—try as I might to remain a detached, objective observer and evaluator, one cannot simply fence off many months of emotionally charged interactions.

As department chair, I have some supervisory responsibilities, but no supervisory powers over my faculty colleagues and virtually no say in salary increases, awards, or any (unlikely) disciplinary actions. Instead, my only official role is overseeing periodic faculty reviews, including the pretenure and tenure reviews when a faculty contract can be terminated. The concept of peer review is central to the academic enterprise, and I've done many reviews of essays, book manuscripts, and tenure dossiers. When reviewing someone's written work in this depersonalized form, the focus is solely on the merit of ideas,

the originality of research, and the quality of writing—while my judgment matters, it is experienced at an often anonymous distance that will have virtually no impact on me going forward, thus I typically judge and move on. But a faculty review within your department merges such detached scholarly assessment with more personal (and personnel) matters; it is an opportunity for peers to assess how well their colleagues are doing their jobs, which (at my institution, at least) is centrally focused on teaching and service, not just scholarship. And for a chair, a faculty review offers the opportunity to put the years of mentorship and growth under the microscope with a high-stakes decision whose outcome directly affects everyone involved.

At my institution, the vast majority of faculty pass their pretenure and tenure reviews—unofficial scuttlebutt places the success rate at around 85%. We usually hire well (in hindsight, Max's case seems to have been an exception) and have a fair system of mentorship and support to enable faculty to succeed, even at an institution with very high expectations for both teaching and research. The pretenure review is typically focused on teaching, with research viewed as more of a work-in-progress, but even the teaching review is framed as a developmental process rather than as already achieved excellence. I've participated in other successful reviews where a faculty member had definite teaching challenges, but there were clear signs of growth and concerted efforts toward improvement. Max's pedagogical problems were significant, but even more problematic was his lack of growth and lack of adaptation to the specific needs of our students and curriculum. A pretenure review charts a predicted arc toward the tenure review, and anyone showing no evidence of continued growth toward tenure will likely fail the process.

Almost all faculty who do not pass their reviews are supported by their departments, but turned down by the college-wide tenure committee, as the personal attachment that faculty feel toward their departmental colleagues can often outweigh gaps in dossiers or performance. In Max's case, our department's frustrations with his performance and lack of responsiveness to advice outweighed any good will we felt toward him as a person, and certainly our problems of mentoring him began to erode that good will. By the midpoint of the fall semester of his review, all of our senior colleagues had recommended that Max not be reappointed, and my letter summarizing that decision was shared with him. While the college review committee ultimately made the decision at the end of the fall semester, the department's unanimous rejection effectively sealed his fate, as only major irregularities in our process would result in such a recommendation being overturned.

Max's failures as a faculty member could be seen in weak teaching evaluations, low scholarly output, and problematic departmental interactions, but in the end it boiled down to his being a poor fit for our department and institution, bearing out some of the original doubts that had lingered from his hiring. This concept of "fit" is certainly a nebulous notion that can be used to enforce homogeneity within a faculty and reduce diversity of perspective, background, or identity. But just because "fit" can be used inappropriately does not mean it's an inappropriate criterion—it's vital that faculty share a common vision of the department and institution's specific commitments and that they find common ground to work toward those goals. While Max had some issues that would be problematic no matter where he was working, he had a particularly difficult time finding common ground with our students and faculty and did not successfully broaden his frame of reference enough to adapt and learn to fit in. If he had found a shared foundation to connect with our students and curriculum, then we would have been able to focus on his potential growth and development; instead, we all felt like his inability to connect after three years suggested that it was unlikely to happen in the future.

Effectively, Max was told he would fail his review in October, but would still be a teaching member of the department until the end of the spring semester, creating an extremely awkward seven months that functioned as a "slow-motion firing." In almost any other labor situation, someone who is "let go" leaves the position immediately, or perhaps has a week or two to wrap up a project. But in our review system, you can be a lame-duck faculty member for months or even potentially an extra year, leaving a failed candidate as a "dead faculty walking" who is regarded by most with pity or hostility. I have no regrets about how I handled his review or the previous years of attempted mentorship, but I wish I had been a bit more proactive in dealing with Max after the departmental decision was made. I tried to give him space to process the decision by generally avoiding interactions, figuring that if he needed to vilify me (as he seemed to do), it would be best done at a distance. In retrospect, I should have tried to establish a civil line of communication, but my own emotional turmoil over having overseen the review made a clean break from interacting with him an easier way to avoid further conflict. Given the cyclical nature of academic hiring and the need to allow time for appeals and due process, I have no answers to avoid the structural cruelty of such slow-motion firings, although I wish there had been more administrative mentoring from my deans to help me and my colleagues process the decision and its fallout.

For anyone involved in the review process, it's important to understand that overseeing a failed review is incredibly hard on a department chair, fraying one's emotions and draining one's energy. In many ways, it means that I failed as a leader and mentor as well, whether I did anything directly wrong or not. The aftermath on a small campus is significant, as Max rallied his friends on the faculty to try to fight the decision. Given the confidentiality of the process, all I could say to anyone who asked was that Max did not meet our institutional expectations, but he was free to spin the story into one of malice, conspiracy, and discrimination that I could do little to counter. Of course, at the end of the process, I still have a job and he does not, so I don't seek much sympathy. However, I'd urge anyone reading this to remember that any chair administering a failed review has probably invested a great deal of emotional energy and, it is hoped, good will into what has probably turned into an unpleasant situation and thus deserves at least a bit of empathy from his colleagues, as well as their awareness that what they might hear from others is probably just a partial and unbalanced version of a full story that must remain locked in confidentiality.

At the end of the review process, and now at the end of my current term as department chair, I'm left feeling that the end result was proper, but that the process was less than effective in creating a productive work environment in either short or long terms. Alas, I have few practical ideas on how to improve the review process, as the timing of the academic calendar makes it difficult to make a slow-motion firing move more quickly, while ensuring fairness to everyone involved. But having faculty reviews so spread out with delayed consequences seems to increase anxiety and potentially foster hostility. Additionally, department chairs get virtually no mentorship from our human resources office or upper administration on how to most effectively handle such situations, so we are left to our own devices to deal with them. Somehow we manage, but frankly, I have consciously chosen career paths to avoid having to do so.

So, I seek solace in the forward motion of the academic cycle. I have newer junior colleagues who have excelled in their teaching and look unlikely to become victims of a slow-motion firing. Max has left my institution for another position that will, it is hoped, prove to be a better fit. And best of all (for me, if not for all of my colleagues), my term as a reluctant manager is over, at least for the time being.