

DePaul News 3: Scandal on campus – When tenure goes wrong.

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By Jaymee Lewis

The November issue of Onyx Magazine sought to explain the policies and procedures behind tenure and promotion as a system at DePaul University. The university uses these procedures to show it values its educators and the academic freedom of many disciplines. Approval of tenure says you are amongst the best and can positively contribute to the academic community. Yet, in case you were unaware of current controversies regarding tenure on DePaul's campus, here is an excerpted update.

In June of the 2009-2010 academic year six professors were denied tenure. Incidentally all of the professors who were denied tenure were people of color. Professor Quinetta Shelby and Namita Goswami were two of those six individuals. Teaching in the Chemistry and Philosophy departments respectively, both educators boasted much recognition on behalf of teaching awards and grants. In regards to Professor Shelby, many students - regardless of race or ethnicity - attest to her great teaching style and see her as one of the most knowledgeable in her field.

The New York Times: Questions of Racial Discrimination on Tenure Unsettle DePaul

“On Dec. 7, professors and students protested this year’s denial of tenure to two minorities, Quinetta Shelby, a black professor of chemistry, and Namita Goswami, an Indian professor of philosophy. Of more than 40 professors who applied for tenure this year, 6 were denied, all of them minorities. Last year, the five professors denied tenure were four women and one minority man. Tensions have run high over the university’s tenure process since 2007, when Norman Finkelstein, a political science professor, was denied tenure amid controversy over his work, which accused Jews of exploiting the Holocaust for monetary gain and attacked Israel as oppressing Palestinians (2010).”

The press conference referred to was held in DePaul Central with representatives from the faculty, staff, and student community. Overwhelming support has been given to these professors, and tenured educators are being sure to vocalize objection to what is essentially a flaw in the tenure and promotion process at DePaul. Gaining media attention, this issue has been pushed forward because of faculty's dissatisfaction with the promotion process currently in place.

As a future educator it is frightening to think this could happen to me because of systemic biases, which encourage professors of color to come to the university and teach non-traditional courses on a tenure track. However, your denial can be based on the content of your work. The university is sending the message that in order to be approved for tenure you must not only have the qualifications, but maintain the status quo.

Regardless of the outcome, I will remain proud of those who are putting themselves in the forefront as educational activists not for themselves, but for those to come. Many are

questioning what stance the university is taking. And with the continuous support of denied professors and the unquestionable data, if this is not systemic bias then the university owes students an explanation of what it is, because the history is painting a negative picture for DePaul, a university that is purportedly aiming to be a “model of diversity”.

Valerie Johnson & Sumi Cho: DePaul Faculty Call Upon Board of Trustees to Intervene in Leadership Crisis

“In 2007, DePaul made national headlines for the high-profile tenure denial of Norman Finkelstein, an outspoken scholar on the Israel-Palestine conflict, who the university publicly admitted was a “prolific scholar” and “outstanding teacher.” In the 2008-09 academic year, of seven tenure denials, five were women and one was a South Asian male. In the most recent academic year, all six tenure denials were faculty of color. The success rate of faculty awarded tenure out of those who applied in 2009-10 was only 40% for faculty of color compared to 100% for white faculty. Of seven faculty members on the university committee that decided tenure and promotion in 2008-09 and 2009-10, only one member was a person of color. By contrast, the faculty appeals boards have had diverse representation of racial minorities and women.”

With an alleged bias that exists within the tenure and promotion procedure at DePaul, potential employees may find it a risk to seek a position at DePaul. After 7 years of teaching, and challenging the university to be true to its diversity, who can blame them? But for the students, this is potentially harmful to DePaul as an activist for equality. We need to see professors who look like us to know that this arduous job called college is possible. We need to see professors who look like us to know there are those who have first-hand experience of fearing that ‘glass ceiling’ in employment or that insecurity, which comes with attending a predominantly white school.

An unknown source quotes the following

“In a unanimous 3-0 decision dated November 2, 2010, the faculty appeals board found that the evaluation of Dr. Shelby’s teaching and research was “biased” and “the effects of that biased evaluation was sufficient to have altered the outcome of Dr. Shelby’s tenure and promotion case.” The appeals board also found that the Chemistry Department violated the university’s Faculty Handbook obligating faculty to “exercise impartiality in passing professional judgments on colleagues.”

There have been various suggestions made to rectify bias of tenure at DePaul; one option would be to look into bringing in outside forces to review a component of the process. Once the decision is made by the department and then the college, this need not be an issue ultimately decided on by the seven members of the University Board, of which there is only one person of color. Why press for more representation? Because the reputation of this great university demands it. Students value the mission of this institution and work diligently to see it is carried through every day. I interact daily with student leaders who know this university through and through. Come and talk to us because we have something to say. We walk through the halls not solely because of where DePaul stands, but because of the immense potential it has to be nationally known for being an agent of change.