

COVID-19 demands a reconsideration of tenure requirements going forward (opinion)

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In the wake of the COVID-19 epidemic, faculty across the country have turned on a dime to teach, do committee work and mentor their students -- all on screens. Students are stressed about their classes and jobs and feeling a mix of emotions about leaving their campuses. Amid all the confusions and hassles, one element of academic life persists more or less unchanged: evaluation.

Students won't get the experiences in the classroom or on campus that they signed up for, but they will get grades. If they're lucky, their faculty and administrations are permitting flexibility with grading, including offering professors the sensible options of pass/fail or credit/no credit. Columbia University and other institutions are applying this policy universally, so that students are not faced with having to decide for themselves and risk being penalized for their choice down the line.

The evaluation process for faculty members coming up for tenure or reappointment is a murkier area. The [Twitterverse](#) ^[1] came alive several weeks ago with calls to extend tenure clocks, and some universities, including Ohio State, rapidly announced yearlong extensions. Recently, 34 learned societies endorsed a [strong statement by the American Sociological Association](#) ^[2] calling for the review and adjustment of faculty evaluation practices in light of the disruptions caused by COVID-19. The [Modern Language Association](#) ^[3]

has called for institutions to “pause the tenure clocks of junior faculty members” during this unprecedented crisis.

But are extensions the best we can do? As Andrew Sullivan recently wrote in New York [4] magazine, COVID-19, like all crises, is shedding bright light on the weaknesses and the strengths of our social fabric. It will open up habits of thinking and action that we previously thought impossible.

COVID-19 has vividly focused our energies on the key question of how to connect with learners -- in the first instance, our students. What if we also think critically about other audiences of learners: Ourselves as scholars and the broader public, and about how our connections with these audiences can shape what we most value about scholarship and what work we choose to reward?

Consider an assistant professor in a humanities department coming up for tenure two years from now, in spring 2022. Like most of her peers, she is revising her dissertation for publication. After two years in different visiting assistant professorships, she is now in her fourth year on the tenure track. This means her first book derives from work she filed six years ago on the basis of research she began two years before that. The topic was already feeling a little stale as she worked on the manuscript last summer, but there's no stopping the clock. Per standard guidelines, summer 2020 is the last period available to finish the book and submit it for publication in time for her tenure review.

The book is important to her and will answer questions of real significance in her discipline. She wonders, though, if it would reach more readers as a tightly argued essay with links to online data. At times she envies her colleagues in the sciences who are given the flexibility to circulate and debate results in real time; they seem immune from the anxiety-ridden isolation she associates with research and writing. These concerns are harder to ignore in the throes of rapid change and uncertainty into which universities and their faculties have been thrust by COVID-19.

Meanwhile, the online teaching she undertook in a spirit of resistance has turned out to be an exhilarating challenge and revealed new possibilities for creating and circulating knowledge. Upon learning that her local public library has created an online lecture series to replace in-person public readings, she sees how her specialized expertise might advance the library's effort to help readers understand literary genres and the ways they influence popular art forms. But as she considers pitching a lecture, using new angles in material she once thought held no more surprises, she feels guilty about spending spare time on anything but completing her book.

The same holds true for other opportunities to make positive contributions and expand her own capacity as an educator during this time of crisis. A teacher at the local high school has asked if one of his students can sit in on her online class this spring. Can her university extend its online courses to nonmatriculated students? What might she learn from teachers skilled in keeping adolescents engaged? Could she play a role in bridging the two institutions, creating a new relationship that can continue beyond the immediate situation?

A Different Approach to Defining What Counts

Our current tenure system leaves our assistant professor no choice. Alive as she is to how her expertise might enrich others and how she might learn from and grow with people outside the academy, she will ultimately follow her senior colleagues' advice: publish her book and wait until she has tenure to explore these new opportunities. She's told, "There's plenty of time."

But is there? In addition to the anticipated hiring freezes many administrations will implement in these uncertain times, we are compelled to ask: If the purpose of research is to enrich understanding, why is the central requirement for tenure at research universities so inflexible? The book -- still the central pillar of a tenure file at research universities -- is just one way to circulate knowledge. As philosophers and mathematicians know (to name two disciplines notable for giving articles the weight accorded to books), shorter

pieces can do the job well. Historians, too, deserve praise for encouraging junior faculty to produce publicly accessible scholarship and for resisting the criticism that such writing is necessarily inferior to highly specialized work.

The conservative influence of the current approach to tenure review on intellectual growth and experimentation is no secret. Many scholars relish the experience of refining their dissertations into books over a period of years, which allows them to broaden their scope, deepen their understanding and connect with scholars outside their disciplines. This approach to scholarship is worthy of deep respect and admiration. Books are good things!

My argument is not for total disruption of the current system. What I advocate is a more flexible approach to defining what counts in the production and circulation of knowledge. This means rethinking requirements for tenure and promotion. Right now, we have an unmissable chance to listen and learn from the experience of listening to and learning from our students and online communities in new ways. We should ask hard questions about the ever-higher value being placed on highly specialized research while our undergraduate and public audiences evaporate.

In 1989, a national task force on the public humanities [5] convened by the American Council of Learned Societies concluded that scholarship and the public humanities are not “two distinct spheres” but “parts of a single process, the process of taking private insight, testing it, and turning it into public knowledge.” Scholarship requires expertise, confidence, trust and love of a better world. These are the characteristics called for in the current crisis, and which can help change our system for the better.

Let our early-career scholars explore, contribute to and thrive in every avenue of opportunity to share knowledge for the greater good. And let them be fairly evaluated and rewarded for this work. Then, not only will we make the most of nearly limitless means of communication and connection, opening up our institutions to diverse people and needs, but we can also make the old warning “publish or perish” fade into history.

Author Bio:

Joy Connolly is president of the American Council of Learned Societies.

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Links

- [1] <https://twitter.com/medflygenes/status/1240035998261743616>
- [2] <https://www.asanet.org/news-events/asa-news/asa-statement-regarding-faculty-review-and-reappointment-processes-during-covid-19-crisis>
- [3] <https://www.mla.org/About-Us/Governance/Executive-Council/Executive-Council-Actions/2020/Statement-on-COVID-19-and-Academic-Labor>
- [4] <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/03/andrew-sullivan-how-to-survive-the-coronavirus-pandemic.html>
- [5] <http://archives.acls.org/op/op11quay.htm>