

Exploring Tenure and Promotion Policies in Engineering Colleges Through Policy Discourse Analysis

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Description of Research Brief Papers

Tenure is vital for academic freedom, job security, and integrity in American higher education. It ensures that faculty can express their views, publish their work, and share their research findings without fear of losing their jobs, thus supporting the advancement and dissemination of knowledge [1]. Tenure significantly benefits the academic community and society by attracting and retaining talented faculty members, thus safeguarding teaching and research [2]. However, tenure has also been criticized for potentially allowing incompetent teachers to keep their jobs, negatively affecting faculty productivity, overstating concerns about academic freedom, and being costly and inefficient [3], [4].

Fundamentally, the tenure process is perceived to be grounded in principles of meritocracy and objectively measurable criteria based on demonstrated excellence in research, teaching, and service-related activities [5]. Research highlights the importance of understanding promotion and tenure policies and expectations as a critical strategy for achieving tenure [6], [7], [8], [9]. However, tenure criteria vary across institutions and departments, making it difficult for faculty to understand expectations [10], [11], [12], [13]. Unclear expectations can exacerbate stress levels, leading to feelings of isolation as faculty strive to meet institutional standards for tenure eligibility [13], [14].

High-stress levels among faculty can seriously affect their health, professional performance, and the overall academic environment. Chronic stress can lead to health issues such as cardiovascular problems, headaches, and fatigue [15], [16], [17], [18], [19], [20]. The engineering academic environment, in particular, has long normalized high-stress levels and demanding work conditions, perpetuating these norms within educational programs [21], [22], [23], [24]. Furthermore, engineers are often portrayed as heroic figures who have conquered the demanding education and now enjoy the rewards of a prestigious and well-compensated profession [25]. This glorification of the engineering profession places additional pressure on individuals to live up to these idealized expectations.

Policy documents formalize ideas, set expectations, and establish institutional norms [26]. Analyzing the language used in these policies can provide insights into how they might be reframed to challenge dominant power structures and better reflect the diversity of faculty identities and experiences [27], [28]. This study aims to examine how the discursive framing of these documents influences and potentially limits faculty roles while also exploring how these policies contribute to the construction of a specific cultural reality within academic institutions. The research question addressed in this study is: What predominant discourses are employed across these policies to shape the roles, responsibilities, and ideals of engineering faculty?

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

This study is grounded in feminist poststructuralism, which challenges structuralism and emphasizes that language and meaning are socially constructed, shaped by cultural context and interactions. Poststructuralists argue that language does not contain inherent meaning but helps

construct reality [27]. Feminist poststructuralism specifically highlights the importance of agency, asserting that both individual and collective actions can resist dominant power structures and bring about change [27], [29], [30]. It critiques and redefines existing theories that sustain inequity [31], offering a valuable lens for examining how well-intentioned policies can inadvertently reinforce the status quo.

In this study, discourse refers to spoken and written language that shapes culture and our sense of self [32]. It is not just a reflection of reality but an active force that helps individuals define their identities and social roles. Policy documents, such as tenure and promotion guidelines, play a significant role in constructing power and knowledge by setting expectations and shaping behaviors. These documents provide the language and concepts that faculty use to understand their roles.

The analytical framework is informed by the work of Blair-Loy and Cech [33], who identify two cultural schemas in STEM: the "work devotion" schema, which prioritizes unwavering dedication to work, and the "scientific excellence" schema, which values individual brilliance while minimizing collaboration and diversity.

Methods

This investigation utilized policy discourse analysis, a hybrid methodology designed to examine policy discourses and how they converge to amplify certain perspectives above others [26]. This methodology "is an approach to policy analysis that works to uncover policy silences and make visible the powerful discourses framing policy initiatives" [26, p.1]. It employs feminist perspectives from both critical and poststructural frameworks to analyze discourses embedded in policies, allowing for the uncovering of the underlying assumptions in policies. Analyzing the language used to describe faculty in tenure and promotion policies can provide insights into how these policies might be reframed to challenge dominant power structures and better reflect the diversity of faculty identities and experiences.

Sample and Data Collection

This study is a component of a more extensive multiple-case study [34], [35], which aims to provide contemporary insights into the tenure process within Colleges of Engineering. The overarching research question guiding this project is: How do institutional policies and individual experiences shape the tenure process for early-career engineering faculty at R1 institutions? This paper concentrates explicitly on the policy discourse analysis part. It focuses on two engineering schools in the Big Ten Conference. The selection of these institutions was deliberate, as they aligned with the origins of participants from the narrative portion of the broader research project. To protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms have been assigned to the institutions throughout this study; they will be referred to as the Northern Lakes University and the Silver Creek Polytechnic Institute.

The data for this study are from an analysis of 15 institutional documents issued at 2 U.S. R1 universities from 1954 to 2022. To retrieve these documents, a search was conducted on each

institution's website using keywords such as “tenure,” “promotion,” “policy,” and “guidelines.” While tenure and promotion documents have various titles, both universities possessed an official document from the College of Engineering that stated the promotion and tenure guidelines within the College.

Findings

The findings of this study indicate the presence of two dominant discourses that shape the images and subject positions of faculty members: the discourse of merit with two discursive strands of work devotion and professional excellence, and a discourse of market-driven priorities. These two perspectives represent differing views on faculty roles and advancement, emphasizing either individual achievements or institutional needs. This section presents evidence of one of these discourses, the discourse of merit. However, I do not argue that the discourses within these policies independently create these subject positions. Instead, the analysis acknowledges that tenure and promotion policies provide discursive strategies that circulate and intersect within broader discursive contexts.

Discourse of Merit

The documents analyzed in this study support the common misconception that tenure is merely seen as a recognition of merit or a symbol of prestige given to a select few [36]; the extensive presence of merit-based language throughout the document sample reflects the belief in meritocracy as an objective standard for evaluating faculty, despite its fundamental issues. This meritocratic basis constructs and perpetuates the idea that faculty members earn tenure and promotion based on individual achievements, disregarding the structural advantages and disadvantages that shape academic careers.

The documents clearly highlight the importance of meritocracy in the process, stating that faculty do not automatically qualify for tenure or promotion; rather, these will be granted solely to a chosen few. The quote below illustrates this perspective:

“Promotion is not automatic nor does it simply depend on length of service. All promotions are recommended and made on the basis of demonstrated merit.” [37]

Here, merit is further highlighted as the defining factor, distancing it from any notion of privilege or systemic advantages, maintaining the narrative of fairness in academia. This merit-based focus is reinforced by the following quote, which highlights the selective nature of tenure and promotion decisions:

“Tenure and promotion imply selectivity and choice; they are awarded for academic and professional merit, not for seniority.” [38]

These statements highlight important elements of meritocracy. First, they dismiss the idea of automatic progression, prioritizing the reward of individual merit, which implies that individuals must demonstrate their value. Second, they stress the importance of selectivity, signaling that promotions or tenure are not guaranteed for everyone; instead, these are awarded to those who perform exceptionally in their positions. The emphasis on selectivity can serve to justify

exclusionary practices that maintain existing power structures. Finally, they oppose seniority-based systems, clearly asserting that mere length of service does not suffice for advancement.

To conclude, the data analysis revealed two discursive strands or lines of argument regarding the discourse of merit: work devotion and professional excellence [33]. The discourse of work devotion portrays faculty by constructing an idealized vision of them, characterizing them as “loyal” and “committed.” For instance:

“A well-designed tenure and promotion system attracts capable and highly qualified individuals as faculty members, strengthens institutional stability by enhancing faculty members' institutional loyalty, and encourages academic excellence by retaining and rewarding the most able people.” [38]

The earlier statement emphasizes that enhancing institutional stability depends on faculty members' dedication to the institution. The concept of the ideal faculty and the corresponding expectations for commitment are articulated in the documents:

“The privilege of a faculty appointment brings with it commensurate responsibilities: responsibilities to serve students, colleagues, and the University, as well as academe and society; to hold oneself to high standards of teaching, scholarship, research, and service; and to adhere to high standards of professional integrity and conduct.” [39]

The previous statements highlight the university's expectations for faculty to serve not only their students and colleagues but also the broader academic community and society.

The discourse of Professional Excellence, the second strand of the discourse of merit, is observed in the documents through an ideal vision of faculty, characterizing them as “capable” and “highly qualified.” This reflects an often standardized ideal of a perfect academic, which is inherently exclusionary. The documents emphasize that excellence is a crucial element of faculty work; they highlight the expectation for faculty to work for excellence in their careers, for example:

“Tenure is awarded to those who demonstrate excellent teaching, outstanding research and scholarship, and substantial additional service, each of which must be relevant to the goals and needs of the University, college and department.” [39]

The following quote complements this description of excellence:

“The faculty member who is a candidate for tenure has a responsibility to develop professionally, to become a valued member of the academic community, to strive for excellence in research and scholarship, teaching and service.” [40]

The previous quote highlights that the recognition of Professional Excellence is not merely retrospective, acknowledging past achievements, but also potential, projecting the future potential for continued academic eminence. This rhetoric fails to interrogate how definitions of excellence may be gendered, racialized, or otherwise biased, and how institutional goals may perpetuate existing power structures in academia. The emphasis on multiple areas of excellence can create an unrealistic and potentially harmful expectation for faculty, particularly those from

underrepresented groups who may face additional burdens of mentorship, advocacy, and representation within their institutions.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study highlight the influence of merit-based discourses in shaping faculty roles and expectations within higher education institutions. Despite its extensive adoption, the meritocratic framework hides the structural inequalities that affect academic careers, including those based on gender, race, and socioeconomic status. By prioritizing individual achievements, tenure and promotion policies reinforce the belief that academic success is solely a product of merit, thus overlooking the systemic advantages and disadvantages that exist within the academic system. This tendency not only masks inequalities but also imposes unrealistic expectations.

A previous study has highlighted that the criteria for tenure can appear inconsistent and arbitrary, with some non-tenured faculty members describing the process as a "secret society" influenced by unwritten rules that tend to favor those who are already tenured [10]. This perception contributes to a fragmented academic landscape, in which the tenure process is seen as mysterious and biased in favor of established faculty members. Griffin et al. [41] mentioned that assessments of merit in tenure and promotion decisions are often subjective and arbitrary, with merit not only defined by dominant ideals but also assigned to those the dominant group believes are hard-working and worthy. As a prior study suggests, the ambiguity inherent in the tenure process perpetuates and legitimizes existing inequities within academia [42]. This lack of transparency exacerbates power imbalances, making it difficult for faculty members from marginalized groups to navigate the tenure system and achieve success.

The intersection of meritocratic discourses with structural inequities creates a complex and often contradictory set of expectations for faculty members. Faculty members who cannot meet these expectations are often viewed as less committed, reinforcing a culture that values productivity over well-being. Studies indicate that the pressure to prioritize professional responsibilities can result in increased stress and burnout, as academics feel obligated to satisfy these expectations consistently [43], [44], [45], [46], [47].

The implications of these findings call for a critical rethinking of tenure and promotion policies within higher education institutions. To address the issues identified, it is essential for institutions to adopt a more holistic and inclusive approach to evaluating faculty performance. Moreover, the study emphasizes the need to confront the systemic biases embedded in current definitions of academic excellence. A complete examination of how these definitions are constructed—and the extent to which they reflect the experiences and values of dominant groups within academia—is necessary for developing more equitable and inclusive evaluation standards. By accounting for the diverse experiences, perspectives, and strengths of all faculty members, institutions can foster a more supportive academic environment that is conducive to the success of all its members, regardless of their background or identity.

Praxiological Action Plan

Praxiology is a theory of human action or practice [48], [49], it offers a powerful lens for research that aims not just to understand the world, but to change it. In the context of this study, praxiology serves as the foundation for an action-oriented approach to examining how tenure and promotion policies in engineering influence faculty roles, values, and identities. Often treated as neutral guidelines, these policies function as powerful regulatory mechanisms. They define what kinds of labor are valued, which identities are validated, and whose contributions are considered legitimate within the academy.

This study embraces praxiology to ask: What would it mean to approach policy analysis not only as an academic exercise, but as a step toward institutional transformation? Instead of ending with a critique, the study is designed to generate actionable insights—insights that challenge exclusionary discourses and push institutions to reimagine how they define, evaluate, and support faculty success. Although the study is centered on documents rather than direct human participants, it is informed by the experience of tenure-track faculty and the engineering culture where narrow definitions of merit can exclude community-engaged work, collaborative teaching, or equity-focused scholarship.

The theoretical grounding for this work draws from feminist poststructuralism, which positions policies as discursive constructions rather than neutral guidelines [29], [32]. This perspective helps unpack how policies shape expectations around who belongs in academia, what kinds of labor are valued, and how success is measured. This theoretical foundation supports questioning of taken-for-granted truths within academia. Whose stories are missing from the language of excellence? Whose work is consistently undervalued in official evaluations? And what alternative narratives can we cultivate to expand the definition of faculty success?

In this study, I acknowledge the risks and limitations of addressing institutional power structures. Even without interviewing participants, the work interacts with real systems of authority, and there is always the potential for resistance, misinterpretation, or inaction. It's not about imposing solutions but inviting reflection and co-creating new possibilities.

The action component of this study is articulated through a set of recommendations to support institutional change. These include: (1) revising T&P policies to include more transparent language; (2) developing practical tools and rubrics to support the equitable evaluation of diverse faculty contributions; (3) facilitating workshops and discussions with department chairs, faculty leaders, and review committees to build awareness of how policy language shapes academic culture; and (4) encouraging departments and institutions to critically reflect on what their policies signal about value, worth, and success.

The anticipated outcomes of this research are both conceptual and practical. On one hand, it contributes to critical policy discourse by highlighting how institutional texts can serve as instruments of both control and transformation. On the other hand, it seeks to influence real-world practices by offering actionable strategies for equity-oriented reform.

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