

Research Brief

Examining the Flexibility Bind in American Tenure and Promotion: An Institutional Ethnographic Approach

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Ethnography and Education

Background

The works of Dorothy Smith provide a broad framework for examining the roles that documents play in institutional contexts and in organizing human social relations generally. In her elaboration of institutional ethnography, Smith links texts to language in the context of institutions in how they come to shape one another: if language serves to organize people's experiences in institutions, then texts become the basis for the institutions themselves as they enable social relations displaced in time and space. Smith's approach emphasizes the materiality of texts in order to ground them in social relations and everyday real life problems, and to provide a methodological entrée into studying institutions.

Purpose

This article examines the role of policy and other forms of documentation in faculty members' experiences of the tenure and promotion process. It takes an institutional ethnographic approach that links institutional documents to participants' experiences of that institution. Specifically, it addresses the questions: 1) How do faculty members who are going through or have gone through the tenure or promotion process view the usefulness of official university policy documents?, and 2) How do faculty members describe and navigate the undocumented aspects of T&P, and how do such informal means affect the institutionalization of practices tied to tenure and promotion?

Methods

Data for this article come from two sources: sixteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) faculty members and department heads from a large public university in the Midwest United States, and the actual tenure and promotion documents at the university. Among the interviews selected for analysis, ten are from women and six from men; at the time of the interviews seven were assistant professors, five were associate professors, two were full professors, and two were department heads. Interview questions focused on experiences with tenure and promotion policies, beliefs about the extent of documentation, their particular challenges, and features of the policies and processes that should be improved. Interviews were approximately an hour in length.

Results

Analysis of T&P documents revealed discrepancies in content and structure across STEM departments and a lack of specificity in the documents. Reflecting this, faculty members reported that university policy and other formal departmental documentation played overall little to no role in specifying the parameters for their work toward tenure or promotion, or for how their work might be evaluated. The ambiguity, combined with a professed need for flexibility in tenure and promotion criteria, led us to develop the term "flexibility bind."

Conclusions

While documents can outline the connections between institutional actors and processes, the spaces of ambiguity and irregularity that they create must also be understood as an integral aspect of the functioning and power of institutions, as well as the experiences of those who work within them. The texts in our study were characterized by complexity and contingency, under a guise of uniformity. In the context of female STEM faculty, who remain significantly underrepresented compared to male faculty, that contingency warrants further examination. It is this feature of documents in institutional life that constitutes the double-edge of the flexibility bind in university tenure and promotion processes.

Implications for Practice

- More specific guidelines for tenure and promotion should be delineated. Likely, this would be most successful at the level of individual departments in order to account for disciplinary variations in criteria or expectations.
- Annual reviews should be individualized, accurate, relevant, and written. Furthermore, accountability of some kind should be built into processes such that tenure and promotion outcomes are tied to, or align with, previously documented annual reviews.
- Faculty members and department chairs should receive training that explains unconscious gender biases and findings from research similar to that discussed in this paper.
- Open voting in which tenure and promotion committee members are required to disclose and, if need be, justify their votes, could be a potentially powerful way to counter-act gender stereotypes. Some institutions already have more open processes in place.

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