Public education without proper compensation: An empirical argument for promotion and tenure reform to encourage public scholarship and academic citizenship

Z. W. Taylor, M. Yvonne Taylor, and Joshua Childs

Abstract

Institutions of higher education desire their faculty members to be high-quality researchers while also acting as engaged academic citizens who produce public scholarship. However, traditional promotion and tenure processes do not reward public-facing academic citizenship, instead valuing peer-reviewed publications and grant dollars. Therefore, a paradox exists: How can institutions of higher education claim they value academic citizenship without recognizing their faculty members for performing such work? This essay argues for a fundamental reform in promotion and tenure policies for tenure track faculty members to encourage academic citizenship and to reward these faculty members for performing this critical, public-facing, community-building work.

Keywords: faculty; faculty affairs; tenure; promotion; academic citizenship; public scholarship

Introduction

Several paradoxes confront faculty who desire to bring their research-based knowledge to bear on current issues of the day through public scholarship and engagement. One such paradox is that of the current depreciation of the public's opinion of academia and intellectualism writ large, dubbed as 'anti-intellectualism' (Merkley, 2020, p. 24). While media outlets and policymakers increasingly seek faculty commentary through quotes in news articles or commentary in opinion and editorial pieces, or *op-eds* (Taylor, 2021), a growing number of lawmakers decry meddling from academics, highlighting a considerable tension between politicians and experts employed by institutions of higher education (Keren & Hawkins, 2015).

In addition, though institutions of higher education—particularly those with deeper pockets—employ media relations and marketing specialists to support faculty in responding to the topics of the day through increased public engagement (Taylor, 2021), these same institutions, through traditional promotion and tenure processes, reward faculty members for publishing in top-tier journals and earning competitive grants and research funds, but have not and do not meaningfully reward faculty for this public intellectualism (Boyer, 1990; Kezar, 2018; Taylor et al., 2023).

These paradoxes place faculty who desire to engage as public citizens through public scholarship in a bind that potentially limits either their engagement as academic citizens or their career progression. As a result, faculty members are often pulled in two different directions as it relates to their scholarly agenda: (i) publish in traditional, peer-reviewed journals and earn research grants to achieve promotion and tenure; or (ii) perform the work of an academic citizen and produce community-focused public scholarship that speaks to a broader audience outside of academia. We argue that the central issue regarding the promotion of academic citizenship and producing public scholarship is primarily due to the former: traditional methods of assessing faculty for promotion and tenure.

From here, this argumentative essay suggests that institutions of higher education should reform their promotion and tenure standards to embrace, encourage, and place value upon public scholarship and the work of an academic citizen, that is, work that connects research to communities in an attempt to speak with and improve the lives of community members, however defined. First, we briefly describe traditional processes of promotion tenure, then we highlight specific problems with these processes. Next, we close by proposing a new model of promotion and tenure that integrates academic citizenship into the work of a faculty member, possibly bridging the gap between an institution of higher education and its community.

The traditional process of promotion and tenure

Traditional notions of promotion and tenure (P&T) have existed for nearly as long as institutions of higher education themselves, with senior faculty members and academic leadership assessing faculty achievement, usually at the end of a five-, six-, or seven-year cycle (Miller, 1987; Niles et al., 2020). To earn P&T, faculty members generally need to publish in top-tier journals, earn research grants and other forms of funding, facilitate high-quality teaching and learning, and perform academic service (Miller, 1987; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). In short, faculty members have been assessed on their ability to be researchers, teachers, and

servants to various stakeholders, with the value of these abilities slightly altered at different institution types (Miller, 1987). Non-research-intensive institutions may reward teaching and service over research, while research-intensive institutions may reward publications and earned grants over teaching and service (Niles et al., 2020; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). Quite literally, this process has been perpetuated for centuries at many institutions of higher education across the world (Taylor et al., 2023; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996).

Related to these traditional processes of P&T, institutions often provide time and resources for faculty members to produce work and compile a competitive portfolio for P&T review and possible approval. First, institutions often provide course releases to tenure-track faculty members to assuage teaching loads (Miller, 1987; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996), while institutions also provide social supports for tenure-track faculty, such as childcare services or travel funds to support a faculty member's capacity to produce academic work (Miller, 1987; Sax et al., 2002). However, many of these supports have been found to be discriminatory against faculty members of Color, women, and other minoritized populations in academia, suggesting that the P&T process can be more or less difficult depending on the discrimination experienced by the faculty member (Sax et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2023; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996).

However, little incentive has existed to encourage faculty members to work as academic citizens beyond the tri-pronged evaluative criteria of (i) research and research funding, (ii) teaching, and (iii) service. The latter of these criteria, incidentally, has been shown to be least rewarded, yet often heavily falls to faculty with minoritized identities, including women/people of Color (Guillaume & Apodaca, 2020; Sax et al., 2002). Public scholarship and work of an academic citizen may not fall into any of these three categories, begging the question as to why faculty members would dedicate precious time and effort to such work. Similarly, institutions of higher education have not worked to integrate public scholarship into P&T evaluations (O'Meara et al., 2015; Kezar, 2018; Taylor, 2021; Taylor et al., 2023), one of the many problems with traditional P&T processes that we outline in the following section.

Problems with traditional promotion and tenure processes

Far from a novel argument, scholars have argued against traditional P&T processes for generations (Boyer, 1990; Miller, 1987; O'Meara et al., 2015; Kezar, 2018; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996; Taylor, 2021). The reasons are myriad. First, an inherent tension is apparent during P&T evaluations, as institutions of higher

education vary in terms of research, teaching, and service expectations on each campus (Miller, 1987; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). Additionally, P&T committees are often composed of faculty members within that institution who also have idiosyncratic conceptualizations of quality and rigor (O'Meara et al., 2015). As a result, the P&T process at many institutions of higher education has been highly subjective and unscientific, even though committees often require faculty members to produce highly scientific work (Niles et al., 2020; O'Meara et al., 2015; Taylor, 2021).

Second, as this process has remained unchanged, researchers have explored inequitable and disproportionately negative P&T evaluations of marginalized faculty members (Bhattacharyya & Murji, 2013; Childs & Johnson, 2018; Guillaume & Apodaca, 2020; Sax et al., 2002). These studies have often found that the P&T process discriminates across many marginalized identities, largely privileging tenure-track faculty who are White men and have access to elite education and connections to academe before their time on the tenure-track begins (Childs & Johnson, 2018; Guillaume & Apodaca, 2020; Sax et al., 2002). P&T processes also discount the tax that minoritized faculty pay to carry increased service duties that benefit the university and students (Guillaume & Apodaca, 2020; Sax et al., 2002). Here, researchers have bemoaned the fact that many faculty members from minoritized groups experience discrimination on their way toward tenure, possibly explaining why the professoriate has not diversified in the same way that the college student population has (Childs & Johnson, 2018; Guillaume & Apodaca, 2020).

Simultaneously, as P&T processes have largely focused on top-tier publishing and procuring research funding, institutions of higher education also desire their faculty members to contribute to the cultural zeitgeist and position themselves as academic citizens (Boyer, 1990; Keren & Hawkins, 2015; Kezar, 2018). Academic citizenship often requires a faculty member to speak to the public as an educated but relatable member of academe, inserting both a faculty member's name and their institution into important and influential societal conversations (Boyer, 1990). Common forms of public scholarship of an academic citizen may include *op-eds* in popular, mainstream publications, appearing on radio, television, and podcasts, or public speaking appearances, all of which are not typically rewarded by P&T processes (Boyer, 1990; Niles et al., 2020; Taylor, 2021). In recent research, faculty members have claimed to have been told by senior faculty members and department chairs that public scholarship 'would not count' and should not be prioritized by tenure-track faculty members (Taylor et al., 2023, p. 16). As a result, faculty members must do it all: publish in top-tier journals, procure research funding, and translate academic work for a general audience to promote

both the institution and the faculty member (Boyer, 1990; Taylor, 2021), even though academic citizenship work may 'not count' toward earning tenure (Taylor et al., 2023, p. 16).

However, a wealth of research has suggested that faculty members and academic citizens may resist producing public scholarship for many reasons (Bhattacharyya & Murji, 2013; Merkley, 2020; Ream et al., 2019; Taylor, 2021; Taylor et al., 2023). Bhattacharyya and Murji (2013) found that faculty of color may feel in danger when producing public scholarship given the societal tensions around race, race relations, and the emotional toll of critically engaged research. Similarly, Ream et al. (2019) insisted that many faculty members may resist engaging in public scholarship until they have earned tenure out of a fear for job security or personal safety. Beyond safety concerns, Merkley (2020) highlighted how many members of the public hold negative sentiment toward academics, leading to a broad sense of anti-intellectualism. Merkley (2020) argued that many researchers have often collaborated on findings to establish scientific truths, yet members of the public often discount those scientific truths for social or political reasons beyond the scope of the research. In this regard, Merkley (2020) reasoned that faculty members and researchers may resist scholarly contact with their communities because they are not trusted or respected.

Finally, several studies have highlighted how institutions of higher education do not place value on public scholarship or the work of an academic citizen, as such work often does not neatly fit into a category of research, teaching, or service (Boyer, 1990; Keren & Hawkins, 2015; Kezar, 2018; Taylor, 2021). As a result, faculty members who are pressed for both time and resources simply opt-out of performing academic citizenship, choosing to produce work valued by academia instead of work potentially valued by members of the public or local communities (Keren & Hawkins, 2015; Kezar, 2018; O'Meara et al., 2015; Taylor, 2021). Thus, we argue for a reform of traditional P&T processes to both incentivize faculty members to connect with their communities and improve the lives of those around them, while also maintaining a level of academic rigor in the pursuit of truth.

Reforming P&T: Encouraging academic citizenship

In many ways, our argument builds upon Kezar's (2018) conceptualization of the scholarly educator. Therein, Kezar (2018) reasoned that faculty members should seek to produce public-facing academic work—known as public scholarship (Taylor, 2021; M. Taylor et al., 2023; Z. Taylor et al., 2023)—that increases the viability of the institution and the faculty member. Kezar's (2018) rationale was

that if institutions of higher education valued public scholarship and the work of an academic citizen, the public writ large would view the institution more favorably and feel more connected to academics who are often unfairly criticized for being elitists who are removed from society (Merkley, 2020).

Moreover, institutions of higher education must recognize the wedge that exists between faculty members and the general public (Boyer, 1990; Keren & Hawkins, 2015; Merkley, 2020), potentially caused by what types of work are valued by traditional P&T processes. Merkley's (2020) study is telling—many members of the public simply do not trust members of academia—and for institutions to become better connected and supportive of their communities, faculty members must be encouraged (and rewarded) to do this work: time and resources are simply too scarce to ask faculty members to do everything. Therefore, using Kezar's (2018) scholarly educator as an influence, we argue that institutions should adopt a four-pronged reform to encourage and reward public scholarship and the work of an academic citizen.

First, we acknowledge that peer-reviewed scholarship should and will always have a place in P&T processes. However, institutions of higher education must acknowledge how inaccessible high-quality, peer-reviewed research has become. Already, the U.S. White House and its Office of Science and Technology Policy (2022) has signed policy guidance that will mandate all federally funded research to be made 'publicly accessible without an embargo on their free and public release' (p. 1). This policy guidance is in reaction to the inaccessibility of scholarly research for the general public, as the Office (2022) strongly asserted that, 'The public should be able to identify which federal agencies support given investments in science, the scientists who conduct that research, and the extent to which peer-review was conducted' (p. 5), and 'Federal agencies should take actions to ensure that these elements of scientific and research integrity are in place in order to strengthen public trust in federally funded science' (pp. 5-6). Here, institutions of higher education should incentivize faculty members to make their research as publicly available as possible, with institutions providing faculty with the time and financial resources to publish their work in publicly-available outlets and support the posting of pre-prints, presentations, research briefs, and other forms of scholarship that allow the public access to high-quality research and scholarly information. Resources such as the Social Science Research Network, arXiv, and ResearchGate are just a few examples of where faculty members can freely share research and encourage public consumption.

Second, institutions of higher education must recognize that knowledge has transformed and transferred rapidly since the beginning of the 21st century, with the Internet playing a critical role in how information is captured and disseminated.

As a result, institutions must value research that engages with the public through other avenues that are not traditionally part of academia, namely forms of public scholarship such as social media, *op-eds*, essays, interviews, podcasts, video content, and other emerging forms of media—this is the work of the scholarly educator (Kezar, 2018). Gasman's (2016) book, *Academics going public: How to write and speak beyond academe,* emphasized this fact, asserting that institutions must incentivize their faculty to share research across various multimedia channels that are much more accessible to the general public in order to promote the public good. For instance, an *op-ed* containing research findings published in USA Today or online at USAToday.com may quickly reach an audience of millions within a week. Inversely, the peer-reviewed journal article that includes those research findings may take months, if not years, to publish and may only be available to those with academic subscriptions or licenses. In this case, both forms of scholarship may be necessary for institutions to encourage this work and evaluate faculty impact: peers should review scholarship to ensure rigor, accuracy, and trustworthiness, but the general public should have access to simpler, shorter, more conversational versions of that research that do not require knowledge of academic publishing or hefty subscription fees. In this sense, institutions must help faculty members be scholarly educators (Kezar, 2018) to help translate their work for the public and find avenues for these faculty members to share their work beyond the peer-reviewed journal article.

Next, institutions of higher education must perform their own research to learn more about how impactful public scholarship and the work of an academic citizen has been and can be. Decades of literature suggest that faculty members who engage with the public through their research and work to improve the public good are highly valued within their local communities and beyond, connecting institutions to the people they purport to serve (Boyer, 1990; Gasman, 2016; Keren & Hawkins, 2015; O'Meara et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2011). To recognize the importance of public scholarship and the work of an academic citizen, institutions should allow faculty members to document their engagement with the public and consider new metrics for scholarly work across different multimedia. For instance, institutions must weigh a peer-reviewed article with 100 downloads differently from a social media posting with 10,000 likes or an *op-ed* with 100,000 reads featuring research from that article. The same question could be broached when considering faculty appearances in broadcast media, such as a faculty member being interviewed by CNN (Cable News Network) to discuss pandemic research or affirmative action policies in higher education. For institutions to count a peer-reviewed article with 100 downloads toward research productivity but fail to count a prominent media appearance that publicly shares the research within that article

seems incongruent and regressive. Moreover, public scholarship need not have a peer-reviewed precedent: Institutions hire faculty members to be experts in their field (Kezar, 2018), and when experts share their knowledge and informed opinions with the public, they should be rewarded through P&T evaluation as they are performing the work of the scholarly educator (Kezar, 2018) and academic citizen.

Revising these criteria may also serve to place more value on the work of minoritized faculty members as well. We argue that institutions who purport to value their institution's connectivity with the community should, in turn, value the academic citizenship of minoritized faculty whose work is community-based and addresses groups of minoritized individuals (e.g., people of Color, low-income people). Taylor et al.'s (2023) study revealed that many faculty members of Color viewed academic citizenship as not contributing toward their tenure portfolio, but these faculty members often performed this work anyway: Community-centric scholarship was important to them. Here, if institutions communicated this value to minoritized faculty members, perhaps these faculty members would experience less stress and anxiety through their tenure-track years, as they would understand that their work will be valued and will count toward tenure. Such a valuing of academic citizenship may also improve the retention of minoritized faculty members, diversifying the professoriate and mitigating the discriminatory attitudes of academia. Therefore, we argue it should be important to institutions as well, and institutions should integrate academic citizenship into their formula for evaluating scholarly productivity and awarding tenure.

Finally, although service is commonly considered the third tier of the P&T process (Miller, 1987; Niles et al., 2020; Taylor, 2021), institutions of higher education should re-conceptualize how faculty service can foster a positive relationship between institutions and their communities, as well as serve a teaching and research function. For a faculty member to conduct research and then share it with the public and/or communities, institutions should see this reciprocity as teaching the public and disseminating research to interested constituents. Kezar (2018) argued that the scholarly educator must seek out opportunities to educate the public in order to convey scholarly knowledge to improve society but also establish relationships with that public. Therefore, service activities that convey research to the public in any way should be considered a form of research output and teaching experience—these activities would be considered apart from working on editorial boards, serving on dissertation committees, advising student organizations, and other traditional notions of faculty service activities.

Given these four reforms, Figure 1 presents a new conceptual model for P&T evaluation.
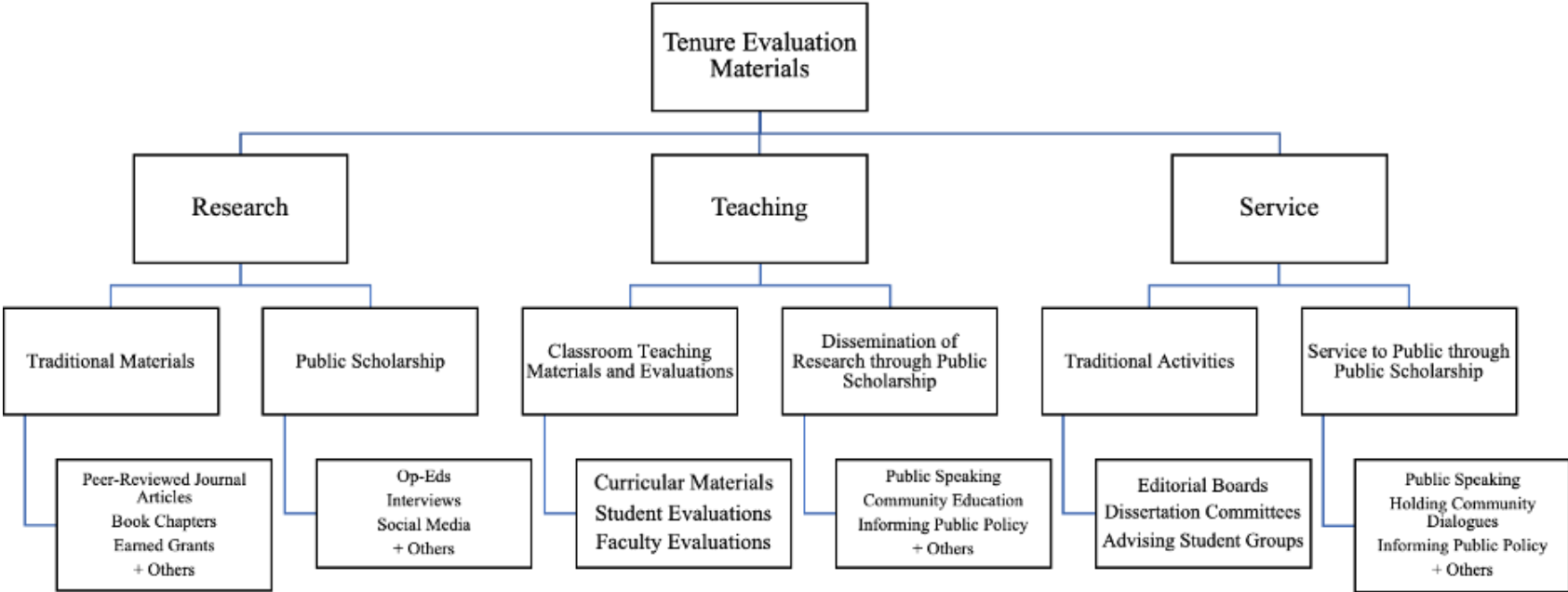
Figure 1. *Conceptual model for promotion and tenure evaluation toward academic citizenship*

This model successfully captures what faculty members are often asked to do during the tenure-track years: research, teach, provide service, and maintain a scholarly public presence in the form of academic citizenship. Engaging with this model, committees evaluating promotion and tenure materials can place value on the public- or community-centric nature of a faculty member's work, especially public scholarship that often 'does not count' toward tenure (Taylor et al., 2023, p. 16). However, public speaking and providing community education should be valued as well, as situations such as these position the faculty member as an expert in their field entrusted to leverage their knowledge to improve society. Here, this model places more value on the relationship between the faculty member and the public or community, embracing the notion that academic citizenship ought not serve an individual's agenda. Instead, an academic citizen serves their community and attempts to bridge the gap between an institution and the public space in which it resides. Ultimately, this model provides an equity-focused, community-centric view of the promotion and tenure process that should accomplish many aims: incentivizing a serving of communities, valuing the work of minoritized faculty members, and improving school-community relations, all of which are just and equitable functions of an institution of higher education.

Conclusion

Emerging research from scholars such as Merkley (2020) and Taylor et al. (2023) to policy advice from the Office of Science and Technology Policy (2022) strongly suggest that traditional notions of promotion and tenure are antiquated and do not incentivize faculty to work as academic citizens and produce public scholarship. Until now, faculty have simply done what they have needed to do to earn promotions and keep their jobs, with many minoritized faculty of Color being systematically excluded from academia due to inequitable P&T practices (Childs & Johnson, 2018; Guillaume & Apodaca, 2020; Sax et al., 2002; M. Taylor et al., 2023; Z. Taylor et al., 2023). In the future, institutions of higher education must recognize the impact and influence of public scholarship to reform their P&T processes and reward faculty for being subject-matter experts and sharing that expertise with the public to improve society. Such an approach would not only work to build better relationships between academia and their communities, but such an approach would also reward faculty members for doing largely what they have been doing for as long as academia has existed: educate the public. This public education deserves proper compensation, and institutions of higher education who truly want

to make a difference in their communities and serve the public should reform P&T policies and promote academic citizenship.

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Joshua Childs is an Assistant Professor in the Educational Policy and Planning program in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy. His research examines the role of inter-organizational networks and cross-sector collaborations to address complex educational issues. He also investigates collaborative approaches involving organizations (local, state, and national) that have the potential to improve academic achievement and opportunities for students in urban and rural schools. This includes ways to improve student engagement and attendance in school, interscholastic athletics, and expanding educational opportunities through concentrated policy design and implementation.

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