

Expanding the Narrative Space of Being an Associate Professor without Tenure Through Personal Narratives and Best Practices

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ABSTRACT

Associate Professor without tenure (APWT) occupies a unique narrative space within higher education. These faculty find themselves at the Associate Professor rank without the accompanying security of tenure. Misunderstandings, miscommunication, and isolation can occur during the APWT tenure processes' often accelerated nature and within the reduced time for APWT faculty to become acculturated to campus and departmental norms. This article shares two APWT faculty tenure narratives and offers some best practices to help make the APWT experience within the academy more successful and less stressful.

Keywords: *Tenure, Associate Professor, Higher Education*

INTRODUCTION

Earning tenure's academic status is one of the most career-defining accomplishments in a tenure-track professor's profession. For many, this is a formal acknowledgment of a faculty member being officially recognized as a senior member of the academic guild (Freeman, 2021). Some scholars have called tenure the "golden handcuffs" (Kaag, J., & van Belle, J. 2023. p.8), alluding to the notion that along with job security, these coveted positions often make it harder for faculty to leave their position for another, given the expectation that the new institution would be expected to offer the same employment security (Steinberg, 2016). However, in most cases, tenure is often earned at the same time the scholar is promoted to the rank of associate professor. Generally, tenure is associated with academic freedom and job security (Garrett, 2017), whereas rank is aligned with salary determinations. There are, in rare cases, however, individuals who advance to the rank of associate professor prior to earning tenure. These individuals with promotion but unearned tenure then fall into the category of *Associate Professor without tenure* (APWT).

This article draws from the authors' personal experiences, faculty policy examples, and the research literature to define APWT positions and illuminate a path forward for others. The intention of the authors is to interrogate the *Associate Professor without tenure* experience and create a future space for other APWT narratives to begin to illuminate this unique space more fully within academia. Included are some possible best practices to support APWT faculty based on the author's experiences and observations.

DEFINING ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR WITHOUT TENURE (APWT)

For this article, the authors define *Associate Professor without tenure* (APWT) as *a faculty member on the tenure-track hired at the rank of Associate Professor*. APWT differs from faculty hired at rank that are not on the tenure-track or with term contracts.

There are a few times when an institution allows for a faculty member to have the status of *Associate Professor without tenure*, for example:

- The person has earned tenure at a previous institution, but the new institution wants time to observe and evaluate the faculty before awarding tenure.
- The person has a stellar prior scholarly, administrative, and/or teaching record that the new institution recognizes. However, the new institution wants time to observe and evaluate the faculty before awarding tenure.
- An institution is unable to attract a high-quality candidate at the Assistant Professor rank given limited resources. However, the prestige attached to the rank of Associate Professor is utilized as an enticement.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE MODERN TENURE EXPERIENCE

Professorship and tenure have historically been the domain of white male professors who have shaped the process and, as a result, have integrated systematic assumptions, expectations, and processes. This systematic, entrenched infrastructure mirrors some of the marginalized voices within academia (Wheeler & Freeman, 2019). Harris and colleagues (2017), in the co-authored introduction to the volume titled *Stories from the Front of the Room: How Higher Education Faculty of Color Overcome Challenges and Thrive in the Academy*, described that “(t)he persistent marginalization of professors of color is common, symptomatic, and systematic” (p. 7).

Harris et al. (2017) also shared that it is not uncommon for Black people to be the only African American and/or first person to earn tenure at an institution. Previously, Black faculty never lasted long enough to get to the tenure stage and further, relating that achieving tenure is akin to a “survivor’s club” of perceptions of unfair treatment, overt racism, and microaggressions (Harris et al., 2017, pp.7-8). In short, one of the authors pointed out that the tenure dossier is a “political document” (Harris et al., 2017, p.9).

As Rice et al. (2000) note, while the tenure process may go smoothly for some, it is often viewed by some as stressful, pressure-filled, and uncertain, with heightened vulnerability for those untenured. One of the main concerns identified by Austin is “the lack of a comprehensible tenure system” (as cited in Rice et al., 2000, p. 14). So, the positionality of tenure, and by association promotion, is one that is political, sometimes marginalizing, and rooted in affirming current systematic power structures.

Under normal circumstances, the tenure process is incomprehensible, marginalizing, and political (Freeman, 2021). For those hired with the rank of Associate Professor without tenure, it is more so. Often, the articulation of any specific APWT process is neglected as

part of faculty bylaws or campus tenure policy documents. An internet search conducted by the authors of this manuscript found very few references to the status of APWT in tenure and promotion documents. In most contexts, these policy documents discuss promoting Assistant Professors to Associate Professor but not the awarding of tenure or the hiring of non-tenure-track faculty at the rank of Associate Professor. An APWT faculty position differs in both of these cases in that they are on the tenure-track, which includes the accompanying expectations and responsibilities for services, teaching, and scholarship. However, perhaps more importantly, APWT faculty often have recently been hired and have limited exposure to the campus and departmental cultural expectations and norms when they proceed through the tenure process.

Recent literature has articulated the experiences and needs of non-tenure-track faculty (Blalock & Stefanese-Yates, 2023; Kezar & Sam, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2011) and shared some of the issues noted by the authors of this article. Of particular note is the call by Alleman and Haviland (2017) for greater collegiality and community between faculty regardless of tenure status. One insight made by Burgan (2006) and reiterated by Kezar and Sam (2010) is that “tenured faculty have largely abdicated their role in defining the professoriate” (p. 7). And Freeman & Ford (2020) challenged minoritized senior faculty to in higher education to please stand up and address such issues. This abdication includes defining the characteristics, scope, and tenure processes for *Associate Professors without tenure*.

There are a few first-person essays and research articles that mention or allude to the topic of being an *Associate Professor without tenure*, but none that spoke specifically about this experience in isolation or with depth (Berger, 2016; Johnson, 2007; Leebron, 2007; Osterbock, 2007; Robboy & Mclendon, 2017). The intention behind this article is to expand and further define the APWT narrative space by the sharing of the author’s own APWT stories.

EXPANDING THE NARRATIVE SPACE OF THE APWT EXPERIENCE

Due to the dearth of narratives available regarding *Associate Professor without tenure* positions, the authors felt it important to include brief reflections on their APWT experience. The authors are witnesses and willing storytellers of their unique APWT experiences. However, there remain limited platforms available to share APWT experiences and create a community around. The intention in sharing these personal narratives is to confirm and expand on what was described in the previous review of the modern tenure experience, as well as to ground the unique nuances that define *Associate Professor without tenure* within lived experiences. The status of APWT is what Douglas et al. (2019) describe as a “border-crossing” experience (p. 2), which, in this case, connects the senior academic status of associate professor to the liminal position of being untenured. This sharing of personal journeys and struggles hopefully further expands the narrative APWT space for others to contextualize and recontextualize their APWT experiences and/or intersections

with APWT faculty members.

Maxwell (2005) asserts that among the many outcomes qualitative research, such as personal narratives, accomplishes is to understand the *meaning* and *context* of lived experiences. Specifically, how “events, actions, and meanings are shaped by the unique circumstances in which these occur (p.22). Personal narrative as qualitative research becomes a mechanism to better articulate how an *Associate Professor without tenure* circumstance is unique and worth interrogating further.

The narratives shared in this article are corroborated by self-interviews, email and social messaging conversations, formal correspondence, and self-reflective notes. Each author’s narrative is supported by four forms of triangulation. The first form is reflection. Each author wrote about their lived experiences separately and then sent them to each other for peer debriefing. The authors additionally discussed their experiences among themselves to clarify their understanding of each other’s experiences. Secondly, the authors reviewed documents that supported their reflections and memory. In particular, reviewing documents such as job advertisements, curriculum vitae, letters of recommendation, third-year reviews, and tenure documents in order to confirm the accuracy of their narratives. Thirdly, the authors reviewed email correspondences that were pertinent to this topic. And lastly, the authors spoke to friends and colleagues familiar with their hiring and tenure process to confirm the interpretations of their experiences shared in this article.

The authors acknowledge that their experiences are not universal for everyone navigating being an *Associate Professor without tenure*. However, these experiences share similar aspects and serve to stake out potential metaphorical guideposts for expanding the narrative of *Associate Professor without tenure*. The authors found resonance among their experiences and observations and hope that by sharing these narratives, they will connect with others intersecting within the liminal space of AWP.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR WITHOUT TENURE EXPERIENCE FOR DR. FREEMAN

I would suggest accepting an APWT position vs. an Assistant Professor position under the following conditions: 1) if there is a clear timeline for going up for tenure; 2) you have strong support from your chair and dean; 3) if the differential in pay is significant; and 4) if you have the mental fortitude to be in a liminal position for the length of time it takes to earn tenure.

The advantage of accepting an untenured Associate Professor position is that a faculty member’s salary is generally tied to rank. Tenure, at the most basic level, is a form of indefinite job security. At the time I was hired into my APWT position, I was unsure how long I would stay in a place that was not close to any family (all my family lived on the East Coast). So, having the appropriate salary was more of a concern for me than tenure. Also, rank is a form of status. Generally, when you are an Associate Professor, you are viewed as someone at the mid-career stage. I was 30 years old at the time I accepted that

position. Having the rank of Associate Professor allowed me to assert myself not as a junior colleague but as someone who was well-established in my field. Generally, people are awarded tenure and promotion to Associate Professor together. Therefore, people generally assume that you have tenure already.

I never functioned as a typical junior scholar. By that, I mean I felt confident to ask questions in meetings and give my true opinions. My only concern was that I sounded informed. So, I never worried about retribution in the same way that other untenured scholars may. I also felt that my productivity was also a shield. I felt like I earned the privilege to speak and have an opinion because I had been productive. I find that those who are socially given the right to speak are those who are highly productive in scholarship and grants. When I initially arrived at the school, I was also told that I had met and exceeded the expectations for tenure, given the standards for publication within the college at the time. Therefore, the time before tenure was just proforma to allow my colleagues to observe me and to see that I was going to be a good fit for the long term. Also, on issues of diversity, I particularly felt that I had some authority in that area because there were only a handful of people of color on the faculty within my college, and I had written in national publications on the topic along with my lived experience. So, I saw myself as a senior scholar without tenure.

I think it may be unspoken, but some tenured faculty believe that you need to demonstrate the same or higher amount of scholarship between your date of hire and submission of your packet for tenure as you did prior to your arrival at the new institution. Being clear about your ultimate goals and why you are doing them is also very important. I have trained to be an academic administrator and served in that capacity for several years prior to serving in a professorial position. However, to continue to move up, it was important for me to gain some credibility as a full-time faculty member. Faculty was a means to an end, not the end, in my case. I saw tenure as a brief stop on my career journey but not the conclusion. I viewed it as a by-product of my hard work and not my central goal. However, I now recognize and appreciate the weightiness of its symbolic and actual value to those who are a part of the academic guild.

With that being said, I did have challenges that arose during my expedited third-year review process, as there were some faculty that believed that they were not adequately consulted that I would come in at the rank of associate professor. There were no complaints related to my productivity, teaching, service, or outreach during the review. However, when I went up early for tenure, my packet was sent to external reviewers who served at institutions that were significantly more resourced than mine and asked if I would receive tenure in their departments. In both cases, during my third-year review and tenure processes, I chose to respond to criticism due to a lack of administrative communication to reviewers regarding my status and background. Although I earned tenure and full professor in record time (i.e., five years and seven months), it was a bumpy process that I believe only people who are not risk-averse and are willing to defend themselves and their record

should pursue.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR WITHOUT TENURE (APWT) EXPERIENCE FOR DR. STODDART

Initially, I was not worried about accepting an untenured position. I was confident that my continued academic output and service would meet the tenure requirements. However, I was also a department head who managed tenured faculty. There was some tension in sharing my voice in administrative meetings when it was running against the grain of the status quo or the desired direction of administrative leadership. This situation also became tenuous when there was departmental conflict, and I had to make unpopular decisions impacting the tenured faculty who would review my tenure application.

I tried to act like a senior colleague and felt rightfully so in my mind since I held rank and had achieved tenure at a previous institution. I felt that I already had the same tenure building blocks in place with my previous accomplishments and current scholarly productivity. By coming in with rank, I assumed that my experiences were validated and valued by others at the institution at some level. Otherwise, why make a hire with advanced rank? So, I acted as a senior faculty member, mentoring newer faculty and facilitating internal professional development opportunities for research and collaboration. I believe my assumption of being senior faculty rankled some of my longer-tenured colleagues. As a new department head, there was tension in trying to set departmental expectations for communication while encountering entrenched habits and unspoken understandings. My efforts seemed to be viewed as threats and devaluing of previous efforts. From my perspective, this was not the case, as I was never given the opportunity by my faculty peers to be brought up to speed about the department's unspoken ins and outs. I actively worked to utilize the existing communication channels and develop new ones. However, I failed to realize that some of the existing communication channels were already stagnating or failing—and the Catch-22 of suggesting new communication efforts was seen by some as threatening. In one striking experience, I was accused of being a liar in front of my department by a tenured faculty peer regarding a minor update to our department website. My faculty accuser was misinformed because of not attending a previous meeting, and the situation was eventually resolved once the faculty member was caught up with the correct information. In the scope of things, the misunderstanding was minor, but the vehemence of the accusation was so striking, suggesting a deep underlying tension. This rush to judgment by a faculty peer shook me to the core and seemingly damaged my credibility with the rest of the faculty moving forward. I tried various strategies to repair these relationships but never felt like it was ever truly resolved.

This lack of trust with my peers was one factor that caused me to withdraw my tenure materials from an early tenure application attempt despite having a strong record of scholarly output and teaching. Based on my previous experiences, I did not trust that my faculty peers would objectively review my tenure materials. I also lacked clear communication from my

dean if they were in full support of awarding tenure. This uncertainty led me to withdraw my application and resubmit for tenure the next year. In this second tenure application, I doubled down on including letters of support and appreciation from campus and external stakeholders in the resubmitted application materials. I felt these external voices in support of my tenure were necessary because I didn't trust the departmental tenure process, which didn't clearly articulate the different APWT processes and requirements for tenure from that of promotion. I really felt alone in navigating the AWPT tenure process and advocating for my application because of all the distrust and uncertainty I encountered as an AWPT faculty member.

PRACTICES TO SUPPORT APWT FACULTY BY DEPARTMENT CHAIRS AND ADMINISTRATORS

The authors both experienced isolation, distrust, peer conflict, and confusion during their APWT experiences, which impacted their tenure experiences. Each author felt that based on their rank as Associate Professors and their ongoing evidence of scholarly productivity, they had earned the privilege of being treated as senior faculty by their peers. However, this was not the case, and they experienced an imbalance in power dynamics from tenured faculty when chairing committees or leading department units. Ultimately, the lack of transparency in the APWT hiring process to fellow faculty and an ill-defined tenure process specific to the unique needs of APWT faculty served to impede the success of the authors as an *Associate Professor without tenure*.

Rice et al. (2000) suggest best practices to support new faculty during the tenure process. While APWT faculty may not be classified as new faculty, this advice still resonates within the unique context of APWT. APWTs are often new to campus culture and policies and do not have the same opportunities to develop campus relationships due to a shortened tenure clock. The tenure best practices by Rice et al. (2000) are included below, with additional commentary from the authors on how they might be adapted to the nuanced experiences of APWT faculty.

Communication of expectations for performance: For new faculty, this advice is intended to clarify how new faculty efforts in scholarship, teaching, and service contribute to their tenure process. These clear expectations are just as important to define for APWT faculty but for different reasons. APWT faculty will most likely bring a portfolio of scholarship and a possible research agenda with them into a new position and will need to understand how that will contribute to their tenure process. A clear and formal plan for how the tenure process for APWT will proceed is a definite need. In many cases, the APWT tenure process might not be defined by campus policy documents, or faculty peers will not have previously encountered this unique tenure situation. As with most communication, putting these expectations in writing serves both the APWT faculty and the institution. These expectations can also be communicated to faculty peers who will participate in reviewing

the tenure materials for APWT faculty as well.

Give feedback on progress: Feedback remains essential for faculty to understand if they are on course to be successful at their institution. APWT faculty require more timely feedback due to the often-shortened timeframe they might have to achieve tenure. In many cases, such as the authors, going up early for tenure is often the rule, not the exception, due to tenure clock credit awarded upon hire. Formal and informal feedback is essential to ensure that APWT faculty is on the right track to be successful.

Enhance the collegial review processes: APWT faculty have a shortened time frame to build collegiality with fellow faculty. Creating opportunities for engagement with fellow faculty and transparency in departmental processes, especially those processes that will impact the APWT tenure, are essential strategies to support APWT faculty. One strategy might include engaging departmental faculty to review a candidate's qualifications that contribute to the rank of Associate Professor before the hiring of APWT faculty. Although it is not necessarily the faculty's prerogative to determine the rank of someone coming in — particularly given the unique circumstances of the hire, having the candidate's qualifications shared with the faculty prior to hiring them may alleviate any confusion about an APWT faculty's standing before arriving on campus and create opportunities for transparency and shared faculty governance in hiring and promotion matters. Whatever the case, the departmental chair should clearly communicate the rank, processes, and expectations to fellow faculty surrounding the hiring of a new APWT faculty member. Department chairs set the tone and should not tolerate passive aggressiveness or hazing of APWT faculty.

Create flexible timelines for tenure: Most likely, APWT faculty will not adhere to traditional promotion and tenure timelines. In many cases, APWT faculty will be hired with credit towards tenure and/or will take advantage of opportunities to submit their tenure materials early since they often have an active body of scholarship or earned tenure at a previous institution. Acknowledging this situation early and creating a flexible schedule that meets both the APWT faculty's expectations and the department's needs is essential to reduce conflict and miscommunication. Further, sharing this timeline with peer faculty will reduce confusion about traditional tenure and promotion expectations that might not apply to an APWT faculty member.

Another concern related to creating a flexible tenure timeline is aligning the APWT tenure process to campus policies around tenure. Often, the tenure and promotion processes are lumped together by promotion and tenure committees. The tenure process requirements should be articulated distinctly from the promotion process to isolate the specific timeline for tenure. The APWT tenure process may not include all aspects of the promotion timeline or requirements. Outlining the APWT tenure process is important not just for APWT faculty but also for peer faculty that review promotion and tenure materials as they may not be clear

on the timeline distinctions and expectations between the promotion and tenure processes. Including a clear yet flexible tenure process in policy documents is an important step to creating a transparent and smooth process for all involved. Remember, recruiting positions as *Associate Professor without tenure* is a potential way to expand candidate pools and entice folks to apply for positions. Tenure policy documents or faculty handbooks should be flexible to accommodate these potential hires and not be seen as rigid barriers that force candidates to reconsider taking an APWT position.

Encouraging mentoring by senior faculty: An additional relevant practice for new faculty that Rice et al. (2000) note in support of collegial relations is also relevant for APWT faculty. APWT faculty may be reluctant to acknowledge the need for a senior faculty mentor due to the belief they are already established within the profession and do not require additional handholding at this stage of their career. However, a senior faculty member can assist with integrating APWT faculty within their departmental and campus culture. A senior faculty mentor can help with navigating the unique nuances of campus tenure policies. A senior faculty mentor can also assist with communication, developing relationships, and advocating for APWT faculty concerns to peers. Assigning a senior faculty mentor is a good first step in supporting a new APWT faculty hire.

Seek APWT Input: A final best practice suggested by educators in regard to supporting non-tenured faculty is deliberately seeking their input (Haviland, et.al., 2020 p. 54). Purposely and consistently seeking input from APWT faculty about their needs and experience is an inclusive practice that addresses some of the isolation APWT may feel. Who would be better to describe their lived experience than APWT faculty themselves? Create time and space for APWT faculty to share their issues, suggest solutions, and point out areas of uncertainty or conflict.

PRACTICES FOR APWT FACULTY TO SUPPORT THEMSELVES

One general piece of advice relevant to most faculty employment matters is to get in writing any negotiated promises, expectations, course releases, salary increases, professional development funding, tenure credit and other related documentation prior to taking an APWT position. Cooper and Temple (2002) suggest some additional strategies for minority and women junior faculty to support their tenure process. These strategies are also relevant for APWT faculty to be successful and are listed below with slight modifications and context related to being an *Associate Professor without tenure*.

Set Priorities: This is a necessary strategy for any faculty member. Cooper and Temple suggest, “Given your own sense of identity, your values and your understanding of departmental priorities develop, a plan for juggling the three major responsibilities of all faculty – teaching, research, and service (p.26-27).” For APWT faculty, creating a plan

incorporating departmental goals and prioritizing efforts that contribute to tenure is an acute need in the APWT context of limited time to achieve tenure and build relationships with stakeholders. These priorities, including rationales for why APWT were hired at their current level with tenure credit, should be put in writing and placed in an APWT file so they can be referenced later or in case of administrator or departmental chair turnover.

Seek out colleagues and network: Creating a network of trustworthy colleagues to give constructive and critical feedback can help ground APWT faculty's experiences. Seeking out colleagues can help create a community of future advocates to support APWT faculty as they navigate their institution and the tenure process.

Be in close contact with the department chair: This is an essential strategy for an APWT faculty member. The departmental chair is the lynchpin to understanding departmental priorities, tenure policies, and culture. Building active and frequent communication with the department chair is one strategy to alleviate uncertainty or surprises during the tenure process. Also, developing a strong relationship with the department chair creates an advocate for the APWT faculty member when the tenure process might go awry.

Seek out formal avenues of support: APWT faculty should become aware of formal avenues of support for them at their institution. Faculty unions, ombudspersons, and formal mentor programs are some examples for APWT faculty to become familiar with. These can be sources to advocate for APWT needs or suggest resources that might help resolve any issues that could arise during the tenure process or otherwise.

Pay close attention to formal feedback: APWT should pay close attention to formal feedback. Documents such as annual reviews are tangible evidence of progress and accomplishment. These documents are also often included in a tenure portfolio for peer faculty to review and draw comments from. If the APWT faculty tenure timeline is accelerated, the number of formal feedback documents available may be limited in number. This places even larger scrutiny on a small body of formal feedback evidence about the APWT faculty member. It is in the APWT faculty member's best interest to pay close attention to how these documents are framed and used and what they convey about the faculty member to others.

Develop a support system: Creating a broad professional and non-professional support system that can reinforce the value of the APWT faculty member emotionally, physically, and professionally. Seek out support from spouses and friends. Become active on committees or within volunteer professional organizations that value your contributions or reinforce your self-worth.

Practice self-care: Self-care is an essential life skill and applies to the stressful arena of

academia. Multiple forms of stress bombard APWT faculty when taking on a new position, maintaining a research agenda, developing new relationships, and navigating the unique APWT tenure process. APWT faculty should always work to achieve a sense of work-life balance and value activities that renew and reinvigorate their health and self-worth. Taking time for physical activities such as hikes, yoga, or exercise is one form of this self-care strategy. Spending time with loved ones is another. In order to maintain a sense of sanity, APWT should identify which strategies contribute to supporting their self-care and prioritize that time in their schedules and lives.

CONCLUSION

The narrative space for the experiences and expectations of faculty who are *Associate Professor without tenure* is not well-defined. This article is an attempt to bring their voices forward to seed a new narrative about this faculty experience. The authors encountered institutional obstacles and incongruent expectations during their APWT experience. Ultimately, each author did receive tenure but acknowledged the process was, at times, unnecessarily challenging and confusing. Isolation, misunderstandings, and conflict were unfortunate characteristics of their APWT experience and should be lessons on how not to shape APWT experiences for others. Adopting the best practices described in this article to support APWT faculty during their unique tenure process can potentially smooth the process for others. The authors hope more APWT faculty will share their experiences and voices to expand this narrative and suggest additional solutions to make the APWT experience successful for others.

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