



Eye of the Beholder

“When we come to it, Dean, there is someone I want to talk with you about,” says the new Chair of Mathematical History, who opens her folder to begin her first annual Fall Term faculty evaluation discussions with you. Everything goes along nicely, with the new Chair essentially giving you the same evaluations of the first five people in the department as the previous Chair did for the past four years. Then assistant professor, Algor Rhythm comes up.

“Here’s where I need your advice, Dean. I know that my predecessor gave Al favorable evaluations every year; but my view of Al’s work isn’t nearly as positive.” And as the new Chair, now in the sixth week of service is telling you this, you reflect that the previous Chair had raved for four years in a row about Algor’s exceptional promise as an innovative teacher and as the only one in the department doing research on Eastern Europe. You know that Algor is up for tenure one year from now and you think back to his mid-probationary review. That too flashes in your mind as essentially positive, if not glowing. But, of course, it was conducted while the new Chair was away on sabbatical. So what’s going on here?

The new Chair says, “Let me just give you the facts, Dean. In teaching I found steady attrition in Al’s classes. It happens every quarter. Our majors don’t want to take his courses. His sections are the last to fill, even when we put them at prime time. And those freshman who do finish his World Cultures course aren’t really prepared to go on to the next course in the sequence. I know because I teach the next course in the sequence. When I asked Al about this he says they know a lot about how to do historical research and how to interpret and contextualize historical phenomena. But I want them to know world history up to 1500; and they don’t. Al says he’s using collaborative problem-based learning methods. I saw a couple of my freshman advisees last week and they told me his classes are disorganized and that he’s not clear about exactly what he wants them to do. And the department has never met and approved those sorts of teaching methods anyway.

“On scholarship,” continues the Chair, “I think we have a different problem. I realize that with the war in Afghanistan we should expect delays. That’s why Al’s research trips to Kabul the past three summers have all been canceled. But in the meantime, aside from a couple of application pieces, he’s hasn’t submitted any basic historical research for publication in a top-ranked mainline journal.

“And on service, well, I don’t mean to be unappreciative because he does what he’s asked; but



that's just the point. For as long as he's been in the department he has taken the attitude that he can wait to be asked. He's told me he would do anything the department needs. Well, what we need is initiative. Everyone else pitches right in. Not Al.

“Anyway, Dean, I can't give you a positive evaluation of Al, even though I wasn't Chair last year and technically the evaluation we are doing right now is for Al's work last year. My predecessor really likes Al. As you can tell, she and I see Al's contributions very differently. And I know that Al's due up for tenure next fall. So, I need your advice about Al and about how to tell my predecessor that I'm Chair now.”

“Eye of the Beholder” Discussion Questions:

- 1) What problems are you foreseeing on this tenure case?
- 2) As Dean, how would you work with this new Chair; on what things, and in what order?
- 3) As Chair, what can you reasonably expect by way of mentoring from the Dean?
- 4) What sorts of tenure and evaluation policies and practices at the departmental and college levels would protect the faculty member, Chair, Dean and institution from experiencing this kind of a mismatch in evaluation from one year to the next?