**What Is the Going Rate for Tenure Nowadays?**



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By Terry McGlynn September 26, 2017

Academics all know that getting tenure requires a high level of performance in scholarship and/or teaching. At many universities, tenure decisions [hinge on](https://labandfield.wordpress.com/2013/04/18/universities-are-not-for-teaching/) the success of the faculty member’s research program. But what exactly is meant by "research success"?

The public and the academic community often define it in traditional ways. Success in a research lab happens when we generate a better understanding of the natural world, and communicate this by publishing academic papers in well-regarded, peer-reviewed venues. Other ways of being successful can include training and mentorship of new scientists for a variety of careers, and communicating scientific results outside the academic community.

But for some university administrators, there’s one measure of research success that trumps all of the others: grant dollars.

Every research university collects overhead funds — using a federally negotiated indirect cost rate (as a proportion of direct costs) — to maintain the infrastructure required to support research activities. My campus has an overhead rate of 46 percent. That means that for every $100,000 that I am awarded in direct costs, my university administration gets $46,000 — allegedly to provide the infrastructure so that I can use the grant money effectively. My university’s overhead rate is on the low end. For example, the overhead rate for Caltech is [65 percent](https://researchadministration.caltech.edu/osr/proposalinfo), and the overhead rate for UCLA is [55 percent](http://ora.research.ucla.edu/OCGA/Pages/Standard-Instit-Info/facilities-and-administrative.aspx). (How the negotiations for overhead rates happen is beyond me, and I imagine it is a very ugly sausage factory.)

If you look at the amount of overhead that grants bring in, and you look at the operating budgets of research universities, it becomes abundantly clear that overhead is not paying all of the bills. In the university setting, it’s primarily "FTE enrollment" — butts in seats — that pays the bills. However, the money a university receives based on FTEs (its number of full-time students, or the equivalent of) is tied to a set of fixed costs, and that funding model doesn’t offer much slush for administrators who can operate more nimbly with dollars that have fewer strings attached. And once you have a budget account with overhead in it, there are almost no strings attached.

So if you’re a provost, a dean, or a department head, you are getting [some kind of cut](https://smallpondscience.com/2013/04/22/overhead-rates-on-grants-and-prize-money-of-the-royal-navy-in-the-napoleonic-wars/) of overhead brought in from the scientists in your little empire, to spend at your discretion. Once you’re used to operating with an overhead account, then it becomes hard to get by without it. It’s easy to see how — as an administrator trying to balance a budget and run a university — one can substitute "grant revenue" as an indicator of scholarly value, instead of defining its worth based on "generation of knowledge."

This is why, over the past few decades, research universities have grown to expect large federal grants from tenure-track faculty members. When we are hired, we receive funding from our universities to set up our laboratories, and we are expected to bring back even more overhead than was required to set up our labs.

That doesn’t seem unreasonable. University start-up packages for a new assistant professor are typically in the six-figure range, as are expectations for external funding. When I was starting out on the market a couple of decades ago, the expectation — either formally stated or informally understood — was that you needed to bring in at least one substantial grant from a federal agency in order to get tenure.

Given the increased competition for a declining pool of federal research dollars, it seems like that expectation should have diminished somewhat for today’s assistant professors. But it hasn’t, according to conversations I’ve had with some recently recruited scientists. Their institutions have been clear, they said, that tenure will depend on their bringing in federal money.

That came as a surprise, for me at least. Funding rates for federal agencies have declined, and allocations to research [have stagnated](http://www.latimes.com/business/hiltzik/la-fi-mh-the-funding-decline-in-basic-research-20150428-column.html) for a long time. Now the odds of getting a "typical" federal grant in my field (population and community ecology) are about 5 percent. When I started my career, funding rates were much higher. From [serving on panels](https://smallpondscience.com/2017/01/02/lessons-from-serving-on-nsf-panels/), I can testify that there are a lot of amazing proposals that do not get funded, and a lot of competitive projects that don’t get support — simply because there isn’t enough money to go around.

These days, landing a big research grant from the National Science Foundation or the National Institutes of Health typically requires an extraordinary combination of merit, persistence, and luck. Nonetheless, some administrators are still expecting assistant professors to have big federal grants in order to be awarded tenure.

In the past year, two scientists discussed on Twitter how their bids for tenure were denied, despite having strong research outputs. Both said they were explicitly told that it was because they didn’t bring in a big federal grant. (One case was reversed months later on appeal, after the provost had a change of heart and overruled a dean.)

I also know of a couple people who have been tenured without landing the big grant. But the administrators don’t want word of that to leak out because what keeps their offices afloat with spending money is overhead from faculty research grants. They seem to think it motivates junior faculty members to have their jobs on the line unless they bring in the dough.

It seems absurd that talented and productive scientists are doing great science but are in serious peril of losing their jobs because they are not bringing in enough money. If it doesn’t seem absurd to you, presumably that’s because you’ve bought into the notion that our job isn’t to do great research, but to bring in money. Then again, in some circles, it is apparently acceptable to define "research success" as [bringing in money](https://peerj.com/articles/1262/).

Of course, there are things you can do with money that you can’t do without it. Regardless, when we use money itself as a metric for success — rather than scientific discovery and communication — then we are holding the door to perverse incentives wide open.

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