

EXAMINING THE UNIVERSITY TENURE PROCESS

STUDENTS' SOCIETY OF MCGILL UNIVERSITY

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Students' Society of
McGill University

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I) INTRODUCTION

1	What is academic tenure?	
1.1	What does tenure mean?	3
1.2	What are some of the benefits of academic tenure?	-
1.3	What are some of the drawbacks of academic tenure?	5
1.4	In general, what is the process for getting academic tenure?	6
1.5	What is the history of academic tenure writ large?	8
2	What does academic tenure at McGill look like?	
2.1	What is the history of academic tenure at McGill?	9
2.2	How is academic tenure evaluated at McGill?	-
2.3	Who gets academic tenure at McGill?	12
2.4	What is the current involvement of students in McGill's academic tenure process?	14
3	How does McGill's tenure process compare to tenure at other universities?	16
4	How can tenure at McGill be improved?	
4.1	What are some ways to address issues raised in this report?	18
4.2	What actions can student representatives take now and in the future to improve tenure practices?	23
5	Additional resources	25

1) INTRODUCTION

Thank you for taking the time to read (some or all of) this report and engage with the complicated issue of tenure. This introduction serves to set the stage for the subsequent report by presenting information on the scope, aims, and methods of this research.

I was hired in June 2019 as Special Researcher (Tenure) under the SSMU Vice President University Affairs Portfolio. Throughout the research and writing process, I collaborated extensively with the VP University Affairs for the 2019-2020 academic year, Madeline Wilson. We met approximately once every two weeks to discuss the progress of the report, but I was given substantial leeway with the direction of the research. The research took a total of just under three months to complete.

Throughout the research and writing of this report, I held two objectives in mind: 1) demystifying tenure for student advocates and the broader student population; and 2) uncovering potential avenues for improvement of tenure for all stakeholders, especially students. This report is intended to be just one part of a broader conversation in SSMU and on campus generally. As such, it should be viewed as a starting point, rather than a static and complete body of research.

In conducting research, I used two main methods. On one hand, I looked independently at various sources surrounding tenure, in order to familiarize myself with the subject and gain understanding of the general facts and existing expressions surrounding the topic. Key sources included newspaper articles, academic literature, and university policies at McGill and elsewhere. Citations to these documents are made throughout the report using hyperlinks, which I chose for their immediate accessibility to the reader. Secondly, I consulted with stakeholders at McGill, particularly undergraduate student representatives. Input came in a variety of formats, from formal written statements to informal private meetings. Because of the range of input types offered to me, I have elected not to include any statements in their full forms, instead including excerpts and paraphrasing. This allows for a better flow in the report and more even engagement with different input mediums.

While I would prefer to be able to share the names and affiliations of all those consulted in the making of this report, keeping this information confidential was a necessary condition for several of those consulted.

Around thirty individuals or groups were contacted in total. Those consulted were a mix of student groups and professors, with more student groups consulted than professors. Around half of those consulted ultimately provided input. Of those who did not provide input, some never replied, while others indicated that they did not have anything to add to the conversation at this time. My hope is that this report will accomplish its first goal of providing information about tenure, which will allow these groups and others to participate more fully in the ongoing conversation surrounding tenure practices.

While I have made every effort to produce a report as comprehensive and representative as possible, this report is no exception to the rule that all research has limitations. Given constraints such as a limited number of contract hours available to me, certain choices had to be made about what sources and individuals to consult and what topics to cover. I thus emphasize again that this report is meant to be a launching pad for better understanding and deeper discussion, as opposed to a one-stop-shop for all things tenure.

This report proceeds in four main parts. It begins with an overview of tenure in general, including the standard processes of tenure along with the benefits and drawbacks of these practices. Next, I provide an outline of key tenure processes at McGill. Thirdly, I synthesize the first two sections through a comparison of McGill's practices with those of other universities. Finally, I provide suggestions for how tenure practices can be improved, including concrete steps that can be taken by student representatives.

All in all, I hope that this report will serve as a valuable starting point in providing greater clarity around tenure processes at McGill and at large. I also hope that it may provide some potential avenues for improvement to all stakeholders, especially undergraduate students.

CATHARINA O'DONNELL

1. WHAT IS ACADEMIC TENURE?

1.1 WHAT DOES TENURE MEAN?

Academic tenure is a type of job status for professors which guarantees substantial job security. When a professor has tenure, we call them “tenured professors.” Professors in positions which are expected to lead to tenure are called “tenure-track” professors and their positions are often referred to as “tenure-track” from the beginning. About one-third of all higher education faculty members [are](#) tenured in the United States.

Professors with tenure can be [viewed](#) as permanent faculty members, whose positions cannot be taken away due to a lack of need, disagreement with university management, or other typical reasons for letting someone go in other industries. In the university context, having tenure differentiates one from contract staff, whose contract might not be renewed at the end of its fixed term if the university no longer has the same demand for the course being taught by this staff member, for example.

Academic tenure is not an absolute guarantee of job permanency, and tenured professors can still technically lose their positions if they break the law or certain institutional rules which vary from university to university.

1.2 WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BENEFITS OF ACADEMIC TENURE?

The key benefit of academic tenure is its role in furthering academic freedom. [Universities Canada](#) defines academic freedom as “[the freedom](#) to teach and conduct research in an academic environment.” Academic freedom can be considered a subset of freedom of speech more generally.

Tenure helps protect academic freedom by ensuring that tenured professors cannot be fired for producing controversial research or teaching controversial subjects. Because universities play a key role in pursuing knowledge and sharing it with society, maintaining academic freedom can be considered a social good. Tenure helps ensure that the pursuit of truth is not constrained by fears related to job security.

Because of its role in safeguarding academic freedom, tenure can be seen as an institution with benefits not only to individual professors, but also to students, policymakers, and society as a whole. For [example](#), Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University professor Marc Edwards discovered high levels of lead in the water in Flint, Michigan, and went to state and local officials, who reassured him that there was nothing to worry about. When he reconfirmed his findings, Edwards chose to create a website to share his research with the public and draw attention to the situation. Academic freedom allowed Edwards to bring this information to public light without worrying about being disciplined or silenced for doing work that risks undermining government interests.

Beyond providing job security, having tenure is [considered](#) an indication of one's commitment to integrity in research and teaching. Tenure is meant to only be granted once professors have demonstrated that they value and pursue rigorous, ethical research in pursuit of public good. Because of this, tenure can be a positive force in encouraging ever-improving standards of rigour and integrity across research as a whole.

Tenure can further benefit students and other consumers of research by [attracting](#) high quality researchers and mitigating some types of conflicts of interest in hiring. Tenure is an attractive job quality, helping to encourage talented researchers to pursue academia in favour of other types of careers.

Further, job security allows professors to more wholeheartedly mentor their students and junior colleagues. Tenure's job security mitigates fear associated with "the student becoming the master," so to speak. Professors can fully and forcefully mentor students, even at the "risk" of the student becoming more successful than the professor, because the professor's position remains secure even if their relative standing in the field shifts. When it comes to hiring, professors may be more likely to hire stronger professors to join the team, even if there is a chance these new recruits will surpass existing professors in their research. Because tenure effectively makes professors irreplaceable, they can participate more fully in training and recruiting future generations of researchers – helping to improve academia as a whole.

1.3 WHAT ARE SOME OF THE DRAWBACKS OF ACADEMIC TENURE?

One potential fear with tenure is that it will encourage professors to stop working hard at their teaching and research. If a professor can't lose their job anyhow, why update their course material or continue producing difficult and time-consuming research? However, this fear is largely unfounded, and little evidence exists to show that professors' efforts decline as a result of tenure.

A more substantiated potential drawback of tenure is that it can be interpreted to mean absolute job protection. In some cases, even professors who break serious laws maintain their positions. In one recent [example](#), a professor at the University of Texas pleaded guilty to a felony charge of domestic violence and was allowed to retain his position because the university "found no relation between how the professor acted in this situation and how he acted on campus." This was despite the professor failing to notify his supervisor of criminal charges, as was required by university policy.

Because of tenure's rigidity, it can also [hinder](#) a university's ability to adapt to the contemporary needs of its students and the public. Even as demand for teachers decreases in a given department, professors cannot be fired. If universities are faced with budget cuts, they may have limited opportunities to cut costs due to tenure. Cuts may have to come from elsewhere, such as downsizing student services or cutting the pay of more vulnerable employees like lecturers or other contract academic staff.

Furthermore, tenure often disproportionately benefits privileged members of society while disadvantaging marginalized groups. Marginalized groups including Indigenous peoples, women, and people of colour are [underrepresented](#) among tenure-track and tenured faculty. In this sense, tenure may act as a gatekeeper to a more inclusive and diverse academy.

Figure A: Key Benefits and Drawbacks of Academic Tenure

THE BENEFITS

- Protects academic freedom
- Indicates and rewards commitment to rigorous and honest research
- Incentivizes pursuit of academic career
- Allows more wholehearted mentorship due to personal job security

THE DRAWBACKS

- May lead to reduced effort following granting of tenure, although this does not appear substantiated
- Can make it difficult to remove professors who have committed even serious crimes
- Hinders university's capacity to adapt to changing resources and demands
- Disproportionately blocks access to marginalized groups including Indigenous peoples, women, and people of colour

1.4 IN GENERAL, WHAT IS THE PROCESS FOR GETTING ACADEMIC TENURE?

In general, tenure is reserved for academic staff who complete both research and teaching. This means that faculty lecturers or other staff whose sole purpose is teaching are typically not eligible for tenure.

Getting tenure usually takes 3-7 years from the time of one's first appointment. Conditional appointments, such as receiving a teaching position while still completing a PhD, usually add to the amount of time that it takes to earn tenure. So, someone who is hired at a university for a year-long position while they are still completing their PhD can expect to spend another 3-7 years following that initial conditional appointment before they achieve tenure.

To [achieve tenure](#), one typically begins in a tenure-track (sometimes called tenure-stream) position. Unless one has held an academic appointment elsewhere, a professor typically enters this first tenure-track position at the rank of "assistant professor." Following 3-7 years, they may apply for tenure and be evaluated based on their teaching, research, and service to the university. If they achieve tenure, they are typically promoted to the rank of "associate professor." Much later in their careers, professors may be promoted to the position of "full professor," or simply "professor." Some universities have another honorary position following full professor, such as "university professor."

At McGill, approximately 40 percent of all tenured and tenure-track faculty [are](#) full professors, around 40 percent are associate professors, and around 20 percent are assistant professors. These proportions have remained relatively constant over the years 2014-2018 (2018 is the last year for which McGill has released data).

Figure B: Academic Tenure Timeline

TYPICAL TIME SPENT IN POSITION	POSITION	TENURE STATUS
0-3 years	Conditional Appointment	Not tenure-track
3-7 years	Assistant Professor	Tenure-track
10-unlimited years	Associate Professor	Tenured
Unlimited	Full Professor	Tenured
0-unlimited	Honorary Professor	Tenured

Teaching and research is virtually always included in the tenure assessment, while service to the university (sitting on committees, etc.) is not always considered at every university. The standard of research required for tenure is typically higher than what is expected for teaching.

To demonstrate excellence in research, tenure candidates are usually expected to show that they have published substantial peer-reviewed research, have participated in conferences, and have received research grants. They might also highlight other types of publications, such as policy briefs or opinion pieces, and other academic responsibilities such as editing an academic journal or reviewing a textbook. Further, research portfolios typically include letters from academic colleagues who attest to the merit of the tenure candidate's research.

To highlight adequate capacity for teaching, tenure committees might look at teaching evaluations provided by students, teaching awards received by the professor, and sample teaching materials such as course syllabi, assignments, and lecture slides or notes.

When service to the university is considered, tenure candidates might demonstrate their participation in various university committees, any administrative appointments they have held (e.g. Honours advisor), and community service relevant to their academic work.

About one in five American probationary faculty members is [denied](#) tenure. When this happens, the professor typically loses their job altogether. Although firing a professor with tenure is difficult, it does happen. In the United States, around two per cent of tenured faculty are dismissed each year. Most of these cases are not widely known, but a recent example provides some illustration of how this might unfold: At St. Edward's University, a small liberal-arts college in Texas, two tenured professors [were removed](#) following alleged harassment and bullying of other colleagues. This dismissal did not go down uncontroversially, and debate [ensued](#) over whether the dismissal was a violation of the academic freedom protected by tenure. To be sure, there is no one exemplar of a typical firing of tenured faculty, but controversy is likely a common staple.

1.5 WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF ACADEMIC TENURE WRIT LARGE?

While structures with some similarities to tenure have been in place almost as long as universities have existed, modern tenure has only existed for around a hundred years. Certain parts of tenure, such as faculty ranks (assistant, associate, full), lifetime appointments, and performance evaluation began emerging in the 19th century, but the truly modern system was [developed](#) following the founding of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in 1915.

The AAUP was founded in order to advocate for professors in all disciplines and higher education institutions. One of the main values that AAUP promoted was academic freedom, and it sought to do this through advocating for protections for faculty following several cases in which prominent faculty members were fired due to controversial views.

Initially following the AAUP's founding, the association primarily advocated for due process and the inclusion of judicial proceedings for tenure. It also established the modern concept of a probationary period that assistant professors must complete before becoming eligible for tenure.

It was in 1940 that the definition of tenure became more stable. The AAUP's 1940 statement [describes](#) tenure as securing "freedom of teaching and research and of extramural activities" and providing "a sufficient degree of economic security to make the profession attractive to men and women of ability." This 1940 statement also reaffirmed that dismissal must be determined by a faculty trial with written charges; reaffirming the importance of the legal element in the tenure process.

Tenure processes have remained largely stable and largely uniform across higher education since the AAUP's work on tenure in the early twentieth century. Prior to this, the existence and shape of tenure varied widely depending on the individual institution.

2. WHAT DOES ACADEMIC TENURE AT MCGILL LOOK LIKE?

2.1 WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF ACADEMIC TENURE AT MCGILL?

In 1935, the president of Rice University in Houston [wrote](#) to the presidents of several prominent Canadian and American higher education institutions to ask what tenure processes looked like at their universities. 78 institutions responded, including McGill. Of the 78 universities who responded, 48 per cent had formal tenure processes. McGill was one of these. The other Canadian university included in the list, University of Toronto, also had formal tenure practices in place.

At the time, McGill was one of just a few universities that described academic freedom as the main objective of tenure policy writ large. The principal and vice chancellor [wrote](#) that “security of tenure is the necessary basis of that liberty of speech which is the most precious and fundamental heritage of universities and places of higher learning” (Rosenthal 2011:8).

2.2 HOW IS ACADEMIC TENURE EVALUATED AT MCGILL?

According to McGill University, “[granting](#) tenure is the most important decision we make.” This was echoed by professors consulted for this report. At McGill, all tenure-track faculty members are part of a “tenure cohort” and have a mandatory year of tenure consideration. Tenure-related policies are outlined in Section 7 of the *Regulations Relating to the Employment of Tenure Track and Tenured Academic Staff*.

For those who enter McGill as assistant professors or assistant librarians, tenure must be considered by the sixth year ([Regulations](#) 7.4). For associate-level professors and librarians, mandatory tenure consideration takes place in the fifth year (7.4). For those who enter McGill at the rank of full professor or librarian, tenure consideration must take place in the fourth year (7.4). For associate or full professors, early consideration of tenure can take place in any year (7.6). Assistant professors can apply for early consideration beginning in the third year (7.6). Faculty members may also request that their tenure be delayed by asking to not have any authorized leaves of longer than three months included in the time period (7.5). However, a maximum of two extensions are permitted before the faculty member is required to be considered for tenure.

For most tenure candidates, who arrive at McGill at the rank of assistant professor and do not apply for early consideration, at least one additional hurdle must be overcome before the tenure stage: reappointment. Assistant professors are appointed on tenure-track positions for an initial period of 3-4 years (6.6). Following the first appointment, if early tenure consideration has not been requested, the assistant professor must pursue reappointment to a second term of up to three years. The reappointment dossier is meant to mirror the tenure dossier (which will be outlined shortly), but no rigid guidelines are set (6.13.1). A reappointment decision is made by a committee made up of department faculty and the department chair, the faculty dean, and the provost (6.14). In general, reappointment to a second three-year term is nearly certain for most professors.

Tenure at McGill is [assessed](#) based on an evaluation of the performance of academic duties, with specific criteria developed by each department (7.10). Professors are assessed in three areas: teaching, research, and service. Professors are required to achieve “superior” performance in at least two of the categories and “reasonable” performance in the third category (7.11.1). All years of the tenure-track period are considered, and performance before the tenure-track period at McGill is not considered except in the case of early tenure candidates. McGill emphasizes that professors are evaluated based on [“performance, not promise.”](#)

Professors who are up for tenure submit a dossier, which includes their curriculum vitae (CV), a personal statement outlining their performance of academic duties, a record of research and professional activities, a record of teaching, and a record of general contributions to the University and to scholarly communities (7.12). All of these documents are produced by the professor, who can determine what to include or omit (for instance, which publications to include or which course syllabus to show). The candidate may also submit additional materials if they wish, such as awards or other documents which they believe contribute to their case for tenure.

In addition to the dossier prepared by the candidate, additional files are added by the chair of the Departmental Tenure Committee (DTC) (7.14). Three reports from external evaluators are also included. These reports act like reference letters and evaluate the candidate’s research and scholarship. The evaluators are meant to have significant standing in their field and must not be employed at McGill (7.16). They may also not be the supervisors or close collaborators of the candidate, in order to avoid conflict of interest (7.16.6). These evaluators receive an external dossier upon which to base their judgment. This dossier is a copy of the internal dossier, except that it does not include information on teaching (7.12.1). The evaluators are chosen based on an agreed-upon list prepared by the candidate and department chair.

Following the DTC’s deliberations, the DTC provides a recommendation for or against tenure, which is submitted to the University Tenure Committee (UTC) (7.23.4). The UTC then convenes to discuss the candidacy, and ultimately makes a recommendation to the Principal. The Principal or their delegate then makes the final decision (7.27).

As indicated in the *Regulations Relating to the Employment of Tenure Track and Tenured Academic Staff*, the DTC is generally chaired by the chair of the relevant department (7.19). The rest of the committee is made up of at least four tenured faculty members from that same department, as well as two alternates (7.20). Similarly, the UTC is generally chaired by the dean of the relevant faculty (7.21). However, membership of the UTC is composed of faculty members who are not part of the same department as the tenure candidate (7.22.3). Again, the committee consists of five people including the chair. In both the DTC and the UTC, the chair can vote and participate in the discussion.

At each stage, only the tenure dossier is meant to be considered. Consultation with professors indicated that this typically becomes only strictly enforced at the request of committee members when attempts to discuss negative reputations or rumours come into play. Committee members might discuss positively about things not included in the dossier, including what the tenure candidate is like as a colleague, but this is often shut down when conversation turns to criticism

If either committee is “tending to the negative,” the tenure candidate must be notified in writing and given the opportunity to address the committee. If the principal is ultimately tending toward the negative in their final individual decision, the candidate is likewise afforded the opportunity to come and address the concerns of the principal.

Once a candidate is granted tenure, they are appointed for an indefinite term beginning on June 1st of the year in which tenure is granted. If tenure is denied, appointments can continue for up to a year in order to provide the necessary 37 weeks notice of dismissal. This means that a professor who is denied tenure may continue to hold their position for several months following this rejection tenure. The candidate also has the option to appeal the tenure decision. The vast majority of tenure cases are approved. In a typical year at McGill only one or two tenure candidates is [denied](#) tenure. With three to five dozen candidates considered every year, the denial rate is typically lower than three percent. Of note, a few candidates usually withdraw from the tenure consideration process before its completion, perhaps preempting a likely denial of tenure.

2.3 WHO GETS ACADEMIC TENURE AT MCGILL?

A key drawback of tenure processes is that they generally advantage already-privileged groups in society while gatekeeping individuals from marginalized groups. White, male, able-bodied, straight academics are overrepresented in tenured and tenure-track positions, while racialized, Indigenous, disabled, non-male, non-heterosexual professors are underrepresented among tenured positions.

The 2018 [Report on Employment Equity](#) showed that the number of women tenure-stream faculty in 2017 was 33 per cent. Conversely, women made up 52 per cent of contract (non-tenured or tenure-track) academic staff and 64 per cent of administrative and support staff. From [2014 to 2018](#) (the most recent year for which data were available at the initial time of release of this report), the proportion of women in tenured and tenure-track positions at McGill increased from 30.1 percent to 32.8 percent, a total change of less than three percentage points. Looking back as far as 2008, women made up 29 percent of all tenure-stream staff, meaning that there has been a total shift of less than four percentage points in the faculty representation of women in the last decade.

When tenured and tenure-track positions are broken down into their three ranks (assistant, association, and full professor), further gender discrepancies emerge. Among assistant professors, women make up 43 percent and men comprise 57 percent. At the associate professor level, women make up only 37 percent of faculty while men form 63 percent. At the full professor level, women form only 23 percent of faculty while men make up the remaining 77 percent. This demonstrates that women are more represented among junior faculty versus senior ranks. Because the overall ratio of women to men among tenured and tenure-track staff has not changed substantially over at least the last decade, it is unlikely that these differences are solely due to women only recently being hired in higher proportions and therefore still working their way through the ranks. Moreover, a look at the mean years men and women spend at the associate professor rank [shows](#) that men move through the ranks faster than women. While men spend approximately eight years at the associate professor level, women spend around ten years at this rank; a difference which is statistically significant at 0.05.

Among contract academic staff (e.g. course lecturers), women see higher representation. For medical teaching staff, which form the largest group of contract academic staff, women represent around 45 percent while men make up the remaining 55 percent ([in 2018](#)). In 2017, the latest year for which McGill has released more complete data on employment equity, women made up 52 percent of all contract academic staff, which is distinctly higher than the 33 percent representation found among tenure and tenure-track positions. There has been virtually no movement in the representation of women among contract academic positions, with the total proportion in 2008 also sitting at 52 percent.

Conversely to their representation in academic staff positions, women are overrepresented among administrative and support staff; positions which usually carry with them substantially lower status, salary, and benefits vis-a-vis tenured academic positions. Women [make up](#) around 64 percent of administrative and support staff, a number which has not substantially shifted in the last ten years: in 2008, women made up 63 percent of administrative and support positions.

Individuals identifying as visible minorities are also [underrepresented](#) among McGill's staff, at 15 percent of all staff (academic and non-academic) in 2017, up only one percentage point from 14 percent in 2008. While finding accurate numbers on representation of specific marginalized groups is difficult, the Black Students' Network estimates that there are fewer than half a dozen tenured Black faculty at McGill. With regards to recruitment and promotion, statistics are also difficult to come by. That said, consultations provided indication of sentiments among the McGill community that racialized teaching staff are sometimes passed over in favour of lesser-qualified white teaching staff. As the Black Students' Network stated in consultations for this report, there is no shortage of highly qualified Black doctors (as in people with PhDs) from which McGill can recruit, and the notion of such a shortage "is a racist narrative put forth when equity hiring is discussed as a solution." Although Black folks may be underrepresented among PhD holders in general, the academic job market is so tight that far more qualified candidates from all marginalized groups exist than do the number of positions needed to bring these groups to equal representation with their proportion of the general population. Moreover, as exemplified by the differentiation of tenure-track and contract academic staff, not all positions are created equally, and the recruitment of racialized staff into precarious positions (such as contract teaching positions) does not have the same effect as recruiting racialized individuals into tenure-track positions.

Indigenous academics are especially underrepresented among McGill's faculty. As stated in the 2017 [Final Report](#) submitted by the Task Force on Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Education, "Indigenous Persons are the most underrepresented of all marginalized groups." As of that report, only 7 of McGill's 1700 tenured and tenure-track professors and librarians self-identified as Indigenous. This represents just 0.4 percent of McGill professors. For perspective, around [5 per cent](#) of Canada's population is Indigenous, and the Indigenous population continues to grow at a rate that is [much higher](#) than Canada's non-Indigenous population.

2.4 WHAT IS THE CURRENT INVOLVEMENT OF STUDENTS IN MCGILL'S ACADEMIC TENURE PROCESS?

Note: This section includes mention of sexual violence. To avoid this content, skip to Section 3, which begins on page 16. The [Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Students' Society \(SACOMSS\)](#) operates a support hotline from noon to midnight, Monday to Friday at 514-398-8500. Up-to-date information about drop-in hours is available [here](#).

Currently, there is virtually zero formal involvement of students in the academic tenure process. Teaching evaluations may be included in the tenure dossier, but this is up to the professor. If teaching evaluations are to be included, it must be in the form of [one intact set](#) of written comments, meaning that both good and bad comments for a course must be shown. That said, the professor may choose which course to include course evaluations for. If a professor believes that sharing their teaching evaluations will help convince the committee that they have achieved the appropriate standard of teaching required for tenure, then the professor can include them. Professors may also include unsolicited notes or student feedback in the tenure dossier. Again, it is not required that the professor include all unsolicited feedback, and so only the best feedback is included, when the professor wants it to be. Formal involvement is therefore still rather informal. If it helps the professor, student feedback might be included. Moreover, the professor may choose to include teaching awards in their portfolio, which means that positive student input may make its way into the tenure consideration process. That said, the opportunities for students to formally provide input which reflects negatively on the professor is, at present, effectively nil.

Informally, students have had more successful involvement in the tenure process. One professor, Prof. Ahmed F. Ibrahim, [himself alleges](#) that a campaign run by students was the reason for his being denied tenure by McGill. In March 2017, the executive team of the World Islamic and Middle East Studies Student Association (WIMESSA) organized petitions against Ibrahim's tenure, citing alleged sexual misconduct based on a relationship he held with an undergraduate student who was once also his research assistant. The open letter was [sent](#) to Robert Wisnovsky, the Director of the Institute of Islamic Studies. This early pressure led McGill to offer Ibrahim a deal in exchange for his resignation, which he refused. This is according to Ibrahim himself, who states in a self-authored [article](#) published on medium.com that:

The campaign was very well-organized: armed with good knowledge of the tenure process, the key players in that process, and the best times to apply pressure on the key players as the process unfolded. The pressure worked. The McGill administration approached me in May of 2017 with an offer in exchange for my resignation. I refused the offer without hesitation.

In September 2017, stickers were posted in bathrooms and other locations around campus, which called Ibrahim an “abusive professor” and asked individuals to submit testimonies about Ibrahim’s behaviour. The [McGill Daily](#) and the [McGill Tribune](#) both published articles about this ongoing event, although they did not refer to Ibrahim by name. Eventually, Ibrahim’s tenure process moved forward and the committee ultimately denied him tenure. Despite that there were no formal complaints regarding sexual assault entered into his tenure file, Ibrahim [argues](#) that the student campaign meant every member of his tenure committee had heard the rumours, ultimately leading to his denial of tenure.

Following the denial of tenure, Ibrahim [launched](#) a \$600,000 lawsuit against a student and an assistant professor, both of whom he claims were behind the sticker campaign that he believes led to his denial of tenure. Since the lawsuit, there has been significant infighting among faculty in the Islamic Studies department, leading McGill to appoint a physics professor (with the aim of reducing conflict of interest) to run the Institute of Islamic Studies while the lawsuit plays out.

The facts of this case, in a variety of dimensions (Ibrahim’s behaviour, the student campaign, and the full reasons for tenure denial) remain unclear. Nonetheless, this case study provides an indication that informal student activism can have an impact on the tenure process.

It should be noted that students are included on McGill hiring committees, meaning that they have a role in the pre-tenure portion of the process, wherein tenure-track appointments are made. This is especially relevant for concerns of who actually gets funnelled into these tenure-track positions in the first place (typically privileged members of society). It also demonstrates that McGill does view students as viable members of at least one type of committee related to hiring and promotion.

3. HOW DOES MCGILL'S TENURE PROCESS COMPARE TO TENURE AT OTHER UNIVERSITIES?

McGill's tenure process largely resembles that of other North American universities, however there are some key differences.

Speaking in broad strokes, McGill tends to consider a smaller sampling of work than other universities. While McGill asks only for a sample of published work, the University of Toronto requests that all publications, including those in progress, be included in the dossier. Furthermore, the [University of Toronto](#) considers activities by the professor at prior institutions, whereas McGill only considers activity in the tenure-track position. There are both benefits and drawbacks to McGill's tenure process in this regard. While it raises the bar for continued high performance, it also erases any red flags occurring prior to a professor's time at McGill.

Another key difference with U of T is the organization of tenure committees. At McGill, committees are created to assess tenure as a whole, whereas at the University of Toronto there are separate committees at the department stage for teaching and research.

Comparing McGill to Concordia, the key difference is the length of the pre-tenure period. At McGill, mandatory tenure assessment occurs at six years for assistant professors, whereas it occurs at just four years for Concordia assistant professors. The larger gap occurs with associate professors. Recall that associate professor is generally the second rank in the three-rank professor system. For professors who arrive at Concordia from another institution, already having been granted associate professor status, the time to tenure decision is just two years, whereas it is five years for McGill. Further, Concordia allows those denied early tenure to try again one year following their scheduled mandatory consideration period, while McGill does not allow a "do-over" to professors who are denied tenure at the early consideration stage, if they choose to go that route.

Generally speaking, elite universities in the United States have less transparent tenure processes than McGill, which considers itself primarily a tenure-granting institution, according to consultations with professors. This means that McGill views itself as having a fairer, more transparent tenure process through which a large proportion of the teaching staff is comprised of tenured faculty. McGill thus aims to be fairer and more transparent with its tenure processes than is often the case at elite American universities. McGill also provides more of an assumed guarantee of tenure, with most tenure-track positions expected to lead to tenure than is the case at more secretive elite American institutions.

At the University of California in Los Angeles ([UCLA](#)), tenure dossiers include teaching evaluations. Further, student input is actively solicited by the department and the candidate. By contrast, McGill only allows unsolicited student letters to be included in the tenure dossier.

In the University of Southern California, teaching evaluations were [recently removed](#) from tenure consideration processes and replaced with a peer evaluation model, wherein faculty members observe classes taught by the professor in question. The cited reasoning behind this move is bias in student evaluations of teaching, which largely harm women and professors of colour.

4. HOW CAN TENURE AT MCGILL BE IMPROVED?

4.1 WHAT ARE SOME WAYS TO ADDRESS ISSUES RAISED IN THIS REPORT?

While professors are often viewed as the main beneficiaries of tenure, they are far from the only stakeholders. The general public, university administration, policymakers, graduate students, and undergraduate students are also groups impacted by the research and teaching produced by universities, and in turn by the institutions that govern who produces this research and teaching. Because the Students' Society of McGill University represents undergraduate students, this report has focussed on the impacts of tenure processes on undergraduate students. **Undergraduate students, like professors, draw benefits and harms from existing tenure processes at McGill.**

Undergraduate students, like professors, benefit from tenure in many ways. The advantages for students at McGill largely mirror the benefits of tenure to students in general. Tenure allows students to be taught by professors who can focus energy on teaching and research rather than on employment logistics. It allows students to find faculty mentors who wholeheartedly support them and are not worried about “the student becoming the master.” It also allows students to be taught about potentially controversial topics and to pursue research on potentially controversial topics under tenured professors. Furthermore, tenure provides professors protection from government pressures, strengthening the opportunity for professors to practice academic honesty and thus allow students to be taught by academically honest faculty.

Overall, tenure has huge benefits to students. As a word of warning, **students should be wary of attacking tenure in its entirety, particularly given the recent trend toward precarious employment in academia. This disproportionately impacts marginalized academics, including women and professors of colour.** Given the importance of diverse representation in faculty, students should be careful not to attack tenure in a way that works counter to marginalized academics working to slow the decline of tenure-track positions. A better approach is to identify elements of the tenure process that are not working as well as they could, and to focus on improving these.

While students certainly benefit from many of the general advantages of tenure, they are also in many ways underserved by the institution. Many issues hurt multiple stakeholders beyond just students. The underrepresentation of marginalized faculty in tenured and tenure-track positions hurts not only these groups and their colleagues, but also students. **All students benefit from a more diverse faculty, but this is especially important for marginalized students, and students from marginalized and/or disadvantaged communities who can substantially benefit from the mentorship and representation of faculty from these respective marginalized groups.** As SSMU Indigenous Affairs stated during consultations for this report:

Indigenous professors at McGill engage in “special” burdens in supporting and mentoring Indigenous students, while acting as representatives of our communities in decolonizing academic spaces. The hiring of faculty members into the tenure stream serves in incorporating and presenting Indigenous knowledge, pedagogical approaches, epistemologies, traditions, and languages into McGill’s academic sphere. The benefit experienced by Indigenous students by this increased representation of Indigenous knowledge cannot be overstated. Indigenous students maintain a unique lived experience, benefiting from an epistemological approach that can run contrary to pedagogical approaches taken by McGill. **Indigenous students will benefit directly, in an academic sense, by increased opportunities to engage in explicit land-based courses, but also through the opportunity to study in culturally safe academic opportunities offered by Indigenous tenured professors.**

Beyond direct benefits to academic experiences of students, an increase in Indigenous faculty representation will benefit Indigenous students because “Indigenous professors and knowledge holders serve in unofficial roles as support systems for Indigenous students within the urban Indigenous community” according to the SSMU Indigenous Affairs statement. Cultural exchanges between Indigenous students and Indigenous faculty are extremely important in cultivating a safe social and cultural environment for Indigenous students within a broader space that is often hostile to these students and experiences.

Similar issues were identified by the Black Students’ Network, who in consultation for this report explained that:

Currently, the limited Black professors that exist at McGill have to carry an exceptional load of emotional labour and labour as a whole whether that be through supporting Black Students, taking on multiple research students and often times being the only ones calling out the institution on their racism. This is not fair to them - They are not responsible for filling these institutional gaps. The BSN supports McGill making efforts to find these Black professors, PhD students, post-doc students, etc. and recruiting them. In addition to that, McGill should make efforts to retain these University teachers whether it’s through competitive salaries, benefits, grants for research and permanent office space.

Advocating for the immediate and continued recruitment of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized faculty into tenure-track positions is one important step that can and should be taken by student representatives. As stated by SSMU Indigenous Affairs, SSMU “has an obligation and mandate to advocate for an expansion of academic tenureship offered to Indigenous knowledge holders.” Concretely, this might be accomplished through general advocacy by the SSMU University Affairs portfolio. Moreover, workshops surrounding hiring equity might be held by the SSMU for student representatives on hiring committees across the community. Although students may have little direct input in recruiting applicants to tenure-track positions, they do have a direct voice at the interviewing and hiring table. This could be utilized both in facilitating marginalized students sitting on hiring committees and in providing resources and training to student representatives on the barriers facing certain marginalized groups as it relates to hiring for tenure-track positions.

One pitfall of the current tenure process is that **teaching takes a backseat in the tenure assessment process, relative to research.** There are very specific ways in which this happens. As one professor told SSMU during the research process for this report, teaching materials are not considered in the external evaluation portion of the tenure assessment process. The professor who spoke to us on this issue described teaching as “central to [their] identity as teacher-scholar” and found it “dismaying.” Because of the reduced weight given to teaching due to this omission in the external package, professors are less incentivized to develop excellence in teaching, which in turn underserves students.

Further, teachers who spend substantial time considering pedagogy and developing their teaching are not rewarded to the same extent as those who spend less time teaching and mentoring and devote this energy to research and university service instead. As one professor told us, “teaching and supervision can be a reflection of research excellence” and are also a way to impact who ends up working in a professor’s field in the future. Because teaching is not considered by external reviewers, the key portion of tenure that impacts students is omitted from a substantial stage of the assessment process. This hurts professors who take on large teaching loads (which tend to disproportionately be younger, women, and racialized) along with students. Allowing at least the option to include teaching and supervision in the external portfolio is one potential avenue of improvement for students and other tenure stakeholders.

Besides the lack of emphasis on teaching quality, **students are also underserved by tenure’s capacity to protect abusive faculty members.** With the way that tenure is currently set up, this happens both before and after tenure is granted. Because disciplinary records are not necessarily included in the tenure dossier, because only what is in the dossier can be discussed, and because no student representatives are consulted in the tenure consideration process, tenure candidates with abusive pasts at McGill and elsewhere can be assessed without any regard for these situations. This was a concern echoed broadly across the group consulted, including student representatives as well as professors. As a statement from the SSMU executive committee read:

It is also telling that the university chooses not to require a copy of the candidate's disciplinary record in their tenure dossier. If the record was required, tenure committees would be able to prevent historically abusive professors from acquiring tenure in the first place. Instead, the university chooses to remain knowingly ignorant of this crucial factor.

Including disciplinary records in the tenure dossier is one important potential avenue for improvement. This is also something that was recommended in the 2018 report of the Ad Hoc Senate Committee on Teaching Staff-Student Relationships. One associate professor consulted in the making of this report pointed to this recommendation as key. Student groups, including the Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Students' Society (SACOMSS), similarly viewed the inclusion of disciplinary records as an important step. According to SACOMSS, "the fact that the disciplinary records are not considered in one's tenure dossier is an absence that maliciously disregards a professor's capacity to adhere to the Policy Against Harassment and Sexual Violence Policy." At [Ryerson University](#), tenure policies explicitly state that disciplinary records may be included in the dossier by the departmental tenure committee chair. Explicating that chairs can include disciplinary records is one potential avenue for improvement at McGill.

Allowing student representatives to provide meaningful input is another appropriate method. Several avenues for student involvement will be discussed in the next section, but an especially relevant and already accessible one here might be the direct delivery of student input to the Provost by the relevant faculty and/or departmental societies. A more formal change might be that the departmental students' association be allowed to submit one letter as part of the tenure dossier. The students' association could then undertake appropriate means of consultation with affected students and compile this feedback into a letter submitted to the tenure committee. Student representatives at the tenure committee would also be an excellent route to pursue. Consultations with student departmental associations indicated that both choosing representatives and/or gathering feedback for a letter would be feasible for many departmental organizations, especially if SSMU were to play a coordinating/training role.

Following tenure, there are also pitfalls that hurt students. There does not seem to be convincing evidence that teaching quality or research output declines because of tenure, and so students should not focus their efforts here. What does seem to hurt students is the difficulty in getting abusive professors removed from their posts or seriously disciplined in any real way, given the rigidity of tenure. This was emphasized by both students and professors consulted for this report. As one professor said, "tenure should not protect professors who abuse their power over students by subjecting them to sexual harassment or other forms of sexual violence." SACOMSS likewise addressed this issue, stating that **"another issue with the Regulations Relating to the Employment of Tenure Track and Tenured Academic Staff is the absence of a clear procedure for losing tenure. This puts the burden of removing tenured professors too heavily on individual students that have been grievously mistreated by those professors."** Addressing this will likely be a longer-term advocacy project, engaging the McGill administration in an ongoing conversation over the norms surrounding tenure.

McGill, like other universities, already claims that tenure is not absolute and that tenured professors can still be removed with cause. The best avenue for addressing this is likely through concrete cases. If student advocates with access to administrative levels (i.e. student Senators and the SSMU VP University Affairs) can push for removal of specific abusive professors, this is likely to be more effective in furthering the conversation than is a general discussion surrounding hypotheticals. advocates with access to administrative levels (i.e. student Senators and the SSMU VP University Affairs) can push for removal of specific abusive professors, this is likely to be more effective in furthering the conversation than is a general discussion surrounding hypotheticals.

Because of the complexity of tenure, it is important to discuss pitfalls that student representatives should be careful to avoid in their tenure-related advocacy. Although initially seeming like a simple and effective route for increasing student engagement in the tenure process, students should not push for course evaluations to be included in the tenure dossier at a higher level than is currently the case. Course evaluations are an extremely [flawed](#) way of evaluating professor performance, as has been shown numerous times. Not only do they fail to accurately reflect teaching effectiveness, they also consistently [show discrimination](#) against women teachers and teachers of colour.

Another important word of caution for student activists on the subject of tenure is to avoid attacking the institution of tenure in itself. There are two reasons for this. First, attacking tenure is bad from a strategic standpoint as it generates visceral reactions of hostility. This was emphasized in consultation with professors. Second, tenure in itself is not harmful to students, and is in fact beneficial. **The problems with tenure come up with the ways in which it is managed, and so the focus of student advocates should be on the processes surrounding tenure, not the rank itself.** Another key consideration for many student advocates will be that attacking tenure risks further reinforcing the movement away from secure employment in academia and toward precarious appointments, which disproportionately impact younger faculty, women, Indigenous faculty, and academics of colour. Such action would therefore be antithetical to the aims of students to increase the representation of marginalized individuals among tenured and tenure-track positions. As succinctly expressed by an associate professor who provided consultation for this report:

Tenure is an extremely important pillar of academic freedom; perhaps the most important. Among other things, it protects rank-and-file professors from administrators. Especially given that so many university instructors today are in precarious non-tenure-track jobs, the institution of tenure ought not to be vitiated.

Consultation with professors also indicated that students should be careful not to engage in mean-spirited attacks on the character of individual administration or faculty members (especially those relatively unrelated to the specific tenure process at hand), not only because this is unpleasant and potentially not in the best faith, but also because this reflects poorly on student advocates and can make other professors who observe this more hostile to student demands.

4.2 WHAT ACTIONS CAN STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES TAKE NOW AND IN THE FUTURE TO IMPROVE TENURE?

- Consider pushing administration to **restructure tenure consideration processes in ways that place more emphasis on teaching and interaction with students.** Like U of T, McGill could consider having separate committees to consider teaching performance and research performance, with each providing a decision independently of the other committee. A student could be included on each committee. While including a student on the teaching committee is most immediately relevant, consultation for this report indicated that students may also have a stake in professor's research, being interested in the kinds of research that are given space on campus.
- Frequently **remind administration of the underrepresentation of marginalized groups in tenured and tenure-track positions.** Use results of McGill's own taskforces to press these points. Demand that McGill actively recruit in equity-seeking communities. Emphasize the importance of expanding Indigenous representation, particularly given McGill's historical position and the continued underrepresentation of Indigenous students in McGill's student body.
- Push administration to **allow student representatives to sit on tenure committees.** Allowing at least one student representative to sit on at least one of the tenure committees would allow for student input to be considered at the table. The best place to start is likely asking for a seat at the departmental tenure committee, as this is where the candidate is considered by peers from their own department, and students from the same department as the professor are most likely to have the most in-depth and valuable insights to provide. This student representative could be chosen in a variety of ways. Consultation with student groups indicated that perhaps SSMU could coordinate and provide training for this, but could allow departmental associations to ultimately choose the student representatives, either from their executive or through another means (applications from department at large, etc.). As was raised by departmental and faculty student representatives consulted in the making of this report, it would be important that this student bring with them input from a wider consultation (e.g. from a survey disseminated by the departmental association, or from focus groups) in order for this representation to be effective rather than simply symbolic.
- Lobby administration to **allow the departmental student association to submit a letter to the tenure dossier.** The departmental association could then conduct consultations as it deems relevant in order to gather input and present it in letter format.
- Push administration to **open a consultation period for all tenure appointments,** where the McGill community at large can submit input on the permanent appointment of faculty. This could mirror the types of consultation periods that are opened for administration positions (deputy provost, vice president, etc).

- Lobby the McGill administration to implement the recommendation of the 2018 report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Teaching Staff-Student Relationships, which called for the university to “ensure that official records that include discipline for breaching the policy [against sexual violence] are communicated to the Dean of the Faculty, prior to a decision being made about tenure.” As came through in consultations for this report, faculty deans are made aware of any faculty members who are deemed by the Special Investigator to have violated the Policy against Sexual Violence. However, the dean privy to this information may not be the same dean still around at the time of tenure review. Moreover, these past records can still not technically be considered in the tenure assessment, even if a dean knows incidents of sexual violence. Implementing the recommendations from the 2018 report is thus an important step.
- Ask McGill administration to **explicitly include “professionalism in teaching and student mentorship” among the criteria considered under the teaching stream** of tenure consideration. As explained by several groups consulted for this report, a professor who does not provide a safe learning environment is not an effective teacher. This ought to be considered in the realm of teaching
- **Push for teaching to be included in the external tenure portfolio.**
- Ask McGill administration to pursue research on better methods of evaluating teaching, which can then be implemented in the tenure consideration process
- Consider lobbying for at least one member of each departmental committee to be a faculty member in a student advising role (e.g. major/minor adviser, undergraduate program director, etc.)
- Consider investigating ways to **better utilize existing avenues for student input on hiring committees**, in order to help influence who enters the tenure track. Workshops, training sessions, or informative literature could be used to encourage student representatives on hiring committees to consider issues of equity and provide the most effective input to the committee.
- **Demand clarity from McGill administration on the existing paths to dismissal for tenured professors and for tenure-track assistant professors** under the new Policy against Sexual Violence. As expressed by one associate professor who provided input in our consultations, “the path to dismissal is not clear” in either case.
- **Continue running grassroots campaigns when abusive professors are up for tenure consideration.** Input derived from consultations indicated that these can have a substantial effect, even if this is not admitted formally by administration. Consider directly focussing efforts on key members involved in the tenure consideration process, including committee chairs and the Provost & Vice-President (Academic). According to consultations with McGill professors, lobbying at the University Tenure Committee (UTC) level might be more effective than at the Departmental Tenure Committee (DTC) level. Even large informal campaigns which get the Provost at the UTC level to recognize the name of the tenure candidate can be effective.

5. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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Wetherbe, James C. 2013. "It's Time for Tenure to Lose Tenure." Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2013/03/its-time-for-tenure-to-lose-te>

