

PUBLISH OR PERISH

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Henry M. Wriston

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On this page each month, a distinguished educator, writer, or critic of education will be given an opportunity to express his views freely on a topic of his own choosing. The opinions expressed may differ sharply from those of the editors.

By HENRY M. WRISTON, *President of the American Assembly, Columbia University, and former president of Brown University.*

CATCH PHRASES compress ideas into clichés that gain wide currency but often distort thought. An illustration is the three familiar words: "Publish or perish." The phrase is commonly understood to describe the basis upon which a junior faculty member acquires senior status and academic tenure. The implication is that this is the only criterion, that the quality of teaching is not taken into account.

In reality, publication is only one of several criteria, though a vital one. In any good institution judgment of published material is based upon its quality rather than mere quantity. Even if bulk were to be used as a test, it could not be employed in different disciplines without discrimination. In mathematics and the physical sciences striking contributions are, as a general rule, made at an early age. On the other hand, critical essays in the humanities and significant contributions to philosophy and history usually come somewhat later; early contributions normally have only a limited scope.

The decision regarding tenure is now made at younger ages than formerly. Depending upon one's viewpoint, the Association of University Professors has exercised "strong leadership" or "great pressure" for early decision. Before the Second World War, the normal age for tenure decisions was in the forties; it now tends to be in the thirties.

A significant result of moving back the decision on tenure by approximately ten years is that universities and colleges have less time in which to observe the work of younger members of the faculty, either in teaching or research. Moreover, there has been intense pressure to count teaching elsewhere as part of their "trial period"; thus the actual time available to any given institution may be far too short for a sound judgment.

A second consequence of early tenure, almost never mentioned, is the extension of the institution's employment commitment by about ten years. Previous practice committed the institution to appointments for fifteen to twenty years; it is now nearer thirty. The decision to grant tenure has also become much more nearly irrevocable because the procedures for removing from office a person with tenure have grown far more complex and difficult than they used to be. Poor teaching is so hard to establish as an adequate ground for discontinuing a tenure appointment that it is seldom used. In thirty years of college administration, the only device I found useful was, in effect, to "buy his contract" by paying salary for a year or two of "leave" in exchange for a resignation.

Under the best of circumstances, estimating the character and quality of a man's teaching is enormously difficult. In the short run, student opinion regarding teaching ability is virtually worthless. In the long run, student judgment about a teacher is nearly always sound, but

early decision regarding tenure must be made before the long-run view has had an opportunity to manifest itself. Opinions of scholars in other institutions are not available as a basis for judging the quality of teaching. They have no opportunity to observe his teaching, though they can judge his writing. Members of his own institution do not visit his classes because it is "bad form."

Teachers who start well may not continue to be effective. In this respect, they are like members of other professions. In words attributed to a famous author, a good many young writers "do not fulfil in middle life the promise of their youth."

The same is true of diplomats. In proposing the famous Eden Reforms in Britain the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs remarked, "Experience has shown that some men who are entirely satisfactory in the early years of their service either do not fulfil their promise or lose the qualities of initiative and energy that are necessary if they are to hold positions of greater responsibility." That is why all first-class foreign services now make it possible to force early retirement—a course not open to college administrators when teachers do not continue to do well.

Yet these same considerations apply to the teacher. Some years ago a study was made on the teaching of chemistry. To everyone's horror, those who made the study concluded that, generally speaking, the quality of teaching was in inverse ratio to the length of service; those with recent graduate training seemed to be the best teachers. This was a clear indication that some who had been regarded as good teachers had not continued to be good teachers after they attained tenure.

Another study revealed that among those who took a doctor's degree in mathematics an enormous percentage never thereafter published any original work. And the teaching of mathematics, as everyone now knows, went through a long and dismal period.

These facts suggest that "publish or perish" has a much deeper significance than its current use implies. The universities and colleges shelter a great many people who achieved tenure on the basis of what was thought to be superior teaching. Some then settled back and failed to continue to grow in their subjects by continuous study or research. During this rapid expansion of knowledge continuous and strenuous effort is required just to be able to teach well, much less expand the bounds of learning. Large numbers, having attained tenure, cease to make that effort; they not only do no research or writing, but are not up-to-date in their subjects.

An experienced teacher should have something to say to others who are committed to the endeavor to advance learning in his discipline. It is the only way in which others of equal age, experience, and training can form a judgment regarding his competence. As a general rule, so far as effective instruction is concerned, those who do not publish do perish. That is the forgotten significance of the current catch phrase.