

NEWS

“So true a fool is love that in your will / Though you do anything, he thinks no ill.”

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE SONNET 57

For tenured professors, dismissal is rare. How does it happen?

BY JAEHA JANG AND ANNA KOONTZ
STAFF REPORTERS

In 2001, Yale fired tenured geology professor and former Saybrook master Antonio Lasaga, who admitted to downloading child pornography and possessing videotapes of a 13-year-old boy engaged in sexual acts in his classroom and Saybrook house, the News reported at the time.

It took 29 months after the Federal Bureau of Investigation raided Lasaga’s Saybrook residence for Yale to ultimately revoke Lasaga’s tenure and dismiss him — only the second instance in the University’s 325-year history that a professor’s tenure was withdrawn, Yale historian and professor emeritus Gaddis Smith ’54 told the News in 2005.

The first instance, in 1904, happened to a philosophy professor due to an “academic dispute,” Smith said in 2005. The professor’s tenure was ultimately restored after he protested, but his “voting rights” on faculty issues were permanently revoked.

While various tenured professors have been suspended by Yale or have voluntarily resigned after allegations of financial mismanagement or sexual misconduct, an exceedingly high bar must be met for the University to strip a professor of their tenure because the status, by definition, provides near-invincible job security.

As tenured computer science professor David Gelernter’s recently revealed correspondence with sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and the University’s subsequent launch of a conduct review process raise questions about the extent of job security that tenure entails, Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis and two departmental chairs spoke to the News about what the status means and why its protections are in place.

“You have job security, you’re not on contract,” philosophy department chair Paul Franks said about the

privilege of tenure in an interview. “And you can only be fired for a certain number of things, like gross moral turpitude, whatever that is. Pretty bad stuff.”

According to Franks, there are two ways to get tenure at Yale. First, a professor who has tenure at a different institution successfully goes through Yale’s tenure review process and is admitted as a tenured professor. Tenure “does not automatically carry through,” Franks added.

Second, a faculty member can enter Yale as an assistant professor on the tenure track, joining what is called the “ladder faculty,” Franks said. After reappointment as an assistant professor in their fourth year, the faculty member can go through the “tenure review” process during their seventh year to gain tenure, according to Franks, as well as the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and Yale Engineering websites.

The process begins on the departmental level, when the faculty member is evaluated by more than 10 external letters from experts in their field, a departmental committee writes a report on the faculty member and tenured departmental faculty vote on the advancement of the review.

If the case receives a majority vote, it is then sent to a Tenure and Appointments Committee that oversees the faculty member’s area. There are four of those committees at Yale — for the social sciences, physical sciences and engineering, humanities and biological sciences — and each consists of 10 to 12 tenured professors in the area, as well as the relevant deans, according to the committees’ webpage.

If a majority of a committee approves reappointment, the case moves on to the Joint Board of Permanent Officers, which consists of all full professors in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences or School of Engineering & Applied Science and some full professors from professional schools, according



LOGAN DINKINS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The News breaks down how one gains — and loses — tenure.

to the Faculty Handbook. Tenure reviews at the board require a two-thirds majority to pass, after which the appointment is forwarded to the Yale Corporation for final approval.

Franks said that the two steps after the committee’s vote — the approvals from the board and the Yale Corporation — are largely formal procedures and that the “real rejectable stuff” happens at the departmental and committee levels.

“In principle, you could get rejected at those stages, but it very rarely happens,” he said of the stages after the committee-level approval. “A lot of this are historical remainders. This is left over from a time when Yale College was probably pretty small, and everybody voted on, there weren’t really departments.”

The processes of reappointment as an assistant professor, which happens before the tenure review process, and promotion to full professor follow mostly similar processes, according to the faculty websites. The reappointment and promotion review processes, however, only require a majority vote at the board — a largely formal step — unlike the two-thirds requirement for tenure review.

Sociology department chair Emily Erikson also said in a phone interview that each of the three processes requires different numbers of external letters and that there are different “evaluative criteria” for each process.

Lewis said in an interview that tenure gives professors the “right” to conduct their research and teach “for an indefinite period.” While all faculty “enjoy the protections of academic freedom,” he added, “clearly, once you’re tenured, you have a certain kind of

autonomy that you lack when you don’t have tenure.”

“Tenure serves one clear good for education by protecting intellectual inquiry that may offend the opinions of a great many people,” Sterling Professor of English David Bromwich ’73 GRD ’77 wrote in an email to the News.

Erikson said that tenure “guarantees employment, which guarantees the autonomy of the faculty.”

The basis of the university is the freedom of faculty, as peers, to “criticize, engage, discuss issues at will and to explore ideas that they believe are important,” Erikson said. The autonomy that tenure “secures” is essential to this process.

She added that the bar for tenure revocation “has to be very high.”

Lewis acknowledged that it’s rare that faculty misconduct leads to the revocation of tenure. When asked about why tenured faculty members may choose to resign instead of facing tenure revocation, he said, “Sometimes you see the writing on the wall, and the faculty member just decides, ‘I don’t want to go through this.’”

“There have been occasions where misconduct has led to revocation of tenure, but it’s pretty infrequent,” Lewis said. “And we do have faculty standards of conduct. So there’s, above all, there’s an expectation that faculty will behave responsibly.”

Lewis emphasized that the faculty conduct review process is the same for tenured and non-tenured faculty. “Doesn’t matter whether you have tenure or not, it would work the same way,” he said of the review process.

The conduct review process

According to the faculty handbook, the provost can refer complaints about academic or sexual misconduct, as well as other issues that are not resolved by the deans of the respective school, to the Faculty Standards Review Committee, which consists of elected faculty members from Yale’s various schools.

“The Provost will submit a complaint to the Committee only if the Provost and the Committee Chair determine that the complaint provides a reasonable basis to believe that (i) a faculty member’s actions were substantially inconsistent with the Faculty Standards of Conduct; (ii) the actions were reckless or intentional; (iii) the actions caused serious harm to the University or to an identified member of the University

community; and (iv) no other process or procedure is available to address the matter,” the handbook reads.

The most recent action complained about must also be within one year of the complaint submission unless the Provost and committee chair agree that “extenuating circumstances” warrant an exception, according to the handbook.

University spokesperson Karen Peart wrote in a Tuesday email to the News that Gerlenter’s “conduct is under review” and that he will not teach while the review process is underway. His emails with Epstein, in one of which he describes a former student as a “v small goodlooking blonde,” are from between 2009 and 2015.

Peart also wrote that the University does not “comment on or confirm the existence of specific complaints.”

In a process that typically takes up to 90 days, a five-member hearing panel within the committee then reviews evidence, interviews witnesses and, after a majority vote, returns a written report to the provost with a conclusion on whether the faculty member violated the standards of conduct. If the panel determines that the faculty member is guilty of a violation, it also recommends further disciplinary steps, including suspension without pay and reduction in salary.

If the panel concludes that “more severe penalties” — including dismissal — are justified, “it may recommend that the Provost forward the matter to the President, who may convoke the University Tribunal,” the handbook also reads.

According to Yale’s website on the University Tribunal, a five-member tribunal panel can, after hearings, recommend to the President that Yale impose a minor or severe sanction, including dismissal, on the faculty member in question. The respondent may appeal within three weeks, after which the Yale Corporation considers the case and sustains the sanction, reduces it or returns the matter to the panel with directions for further proceedings. If the matter is returned, the panel would then create new recommendations for the Corporation, which makes the final decision.

If a tribunal is not recommended by the faculty standards committee, the provost, after a hearing period, can “accept, modify, or reject the conclusions of the panel or any of its recommendations.”

Either the complainant or the accused professor can appeal the provost’s decision within seven days on grounds of a procedural error, the discovery of new evidence or “the imposition of a penalty grossly disproportionate to the behavior found by the panel.” If this appeal is granted by the president, the panel will reconvene and issue a new recommendation with the president’s input, and the provost will consider the new recommendation.

That decision would not be subject to appeal.

In 2025, Harvard University stripped tenure from a professor accused of data fraud in what was the university’s first tenure revocation since its rules were formalized in the 1940s, according to the Harvard Crimson.

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Awards of up to \$5000 will be granted. There is no application form, but proposals are expected to contain a brief summary of academic background, a statement of objectives, an itinerary and a budget.

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You can visit the website at <https://saintanthonyhallsigma.org/chase-coggins-memorial-fund/>
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