

# CURSUS<sup>1</sup>: THE POLITICS OF TENURE AND PROMOTION (A CASE STUDY)

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Case Study  
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## ABSTRACT

*Ian Finagle moves from his initial employer, Façade University, to Megalith University, a much more prestigious “publish or perish” institution. Although Finagle is granted tenure at Megalith after a few years, when he applies for promotion to full professor, he runs into political games played by his dean, Frank Caine. Learners are asked to analyze the events described in the case study from two perspectives, that of a professor’s career and that of the university, by drawing from the literature on organizational politics.*

## CASE STUDY

Ian Finagle was nursing a cup of coffee, coffee as bitter as a convicted politician and cold as a cop’s stare. The coffee, however, was warm and sweet when compared to Finagle’s mood—a mood sparked by thwarted ambition and by what realtors call, “location, location, location.”

The problem was a pesky clause in a rather archaic tome entitled University Regulations Pertaining to Tenured Faculty, Non-tenured Faculty, and Instructors, which contained several hundred pages of does and don’ts for the academic minions of Megalith University. The problematic clause reads as follows:

*At the end of their sixth year, all tenured faculty at the rank of Associate Professor are invited and required to submit their application for the rank of Professor. This application, however, may, upon the request of the Candidate, be delayed for up to two (2) calendar years at which time such an application will be mandatory.*

Now this clause, by itself, wasn’t really the problem. The problem was, as we’ve said “location.” The first location problem was that, after some time at Façade University, Finagle applied for a job at Megalith University. At Façade, he was an assistant professor, but things changed radically with a single call.

“Hi Tom, it’s Ian; how have you been?”

“Ian, you’re the last guy I’d expect to hear from! How long’s it been since we were playing ‘Baffle the Professor’ in Graduate school? I can still remember working on Professor Brick’s group presentation. Do you remember how Brick said he’d give 20 participation points for asking other student presenters good questions in class? And, after three weeks of our good questions – and a pending riot from other MBAs – he told us, out in the hall, he’d give us all 20 points if we’d just shut up? Boy, those were the days! Anyway, what have you been up to at Façade?”

“Ah, you know Tom, the big three: teaching, service, and research. How about you?”

Now the conversation went on along this track for quite a while but finally, Tom said “I’d love it if you’d come out to Megalith for a visit. You’ve never been to this part of the country, I could play tour guide, and we could compare research notes over more than one drink. What do you say?”

“Tom, I’d love to, but I’m an underpaid assistant prof, and at Façade underpaid *really* means underpaid for a guy here only a couple of years. As someone once said ‘We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us’”<sup>2</sup>

“Hey, that’s not a problem, old son. I’ve got some pull with my dean. We’d pay for everything. We’ll just tell folks you’re interviewing for a job.”

“But Tom, I’m not on the market. I’m not looking to change universities.”

“That’s not a problem either. Lots of folks interview with us, but most end up saying *No*. We’re a bit of a ‘publish or perish’ joint, you know, so one more guy telling us *No* won’t make a bit of difference – and we’ve got one heck of a recruitment budget. You know what they say, use it or lose it. What do you say?”

When you're young, the temptation to travel is most alluring, as is visiting with old friends. So, in a moment of weakness, Finagle replied, "If you're willing to tell your dean and the folks on your Recruitment Committee that I'm not really interested and they're still willing to pay to get me out there then, sure, I'll come."

It was a magnificent trip. Tom was as good as his word and a fascinating tour guide as well. Megalith, you see, was a great university, in a truly great city, a city of magnificent restaurants and spectacular theatres. It was in a city of strange museums, curious open-air markets, and enthralling local geography. Oddly enough, the interview was as much fun as the tourist attractions. Now usually academic interviewing is an exercise in anxiety and formality. This time it just wasn't. It may have been, but not being a serious candidate, Finagle felt, well, liberated from the strain and formality that such events usually entail. Or it may have been the faculty at Megalith who was looking for a reason to have a party. Whatever the reason, the reception following Finagle's presentation<sup>3</sup> was more like a celebration with old friends, while a highlight of his trip was dinner at an up-scale restaurant with members of the Recruitment Committee. If you haven't experienced such an event, you should know that Recruitment dinners are often mini-inquisitions and exercises in one-upmanship – with the players believing that "if you're not one-up, you're one-down."<sup>4</sup> This time, however, the Committee members, after several bottles of very good wine, started discussing Finagle's presentation, building on his ideas, offering additional references, and being quite complimentary. John Kenny, the Dean at Megalith and the Chair of the Recruitment Committee, was especially gracious. At one point, the laughter and the exchange of ideas were so loud that a waiter asked, discreetly, if the party would mind lowering the volume so as not to disturb the other patrons. All in all, it was quite a night.

The next morning found Finagle in Kenny's office, with a slight headache, we might add, talking about the previous night and asking a few questions, mostly out of politeness. "John, thanks so much for last night. You've got quite a crew here, and they've given me a lot to think about."

"Oh, you're welcome, Ian. It was a great presentation, and you gave us a lot to think about too. But do you have any questions about the faculty or Megalith?"

"Well, a few." Ian, being somewhat political, asked about John's vision for the faculty, how he might contribute, and some questions about the curriculum (having, the night before – despite a bit too much Merlot – reviewed the course requirements for both the Undergraduate and Graduate degrees). Finally, "John, one last question, since we're on the topic of curriculum and contribution, I'd like to talk a little bit about research. Although I do publish a bit, I see myself more as a teacher, and I do 'butterfly research.'"<sup>5</sup>

"Butterfly research? What on *earth* is that?"

"Oh, sorry. It means not sticking to a single topic or building an integrated research stream; it's jumping from topic to topic just like a butterfly darts from flower to flower. I like collecting ideas, so I'm not really a specialist. I have some eclectic research tastes from a friend of mine." (This said with a sad, far-away look in his eyes.)<sup>6</sup>

"Hmm, seems to me you'd always be starting over. It takes a lot of time to get up to speed on any topic. Why not devote yourself to a single topic, get published, and be known as an expert in the field?"

"John, you've made a great point, but I don't want to be an expert. I don't want to '...know more and more about less and less till I know everything about nothing'.<sup>7</sup> I'd also say I'm more of a 'local' than a 'cosmopolitan'.<sup>8</sup> I'd much rather educate my students than the people in my field. Most folks in the field can learn on their own. They don't need me, but my undergraduate students do."

"Well, Ian, for a 'publish or perish' faculty, that's a very interesting position to take."

Now there were several more meetings with members of the Recruitment Committee but at last, Tom drove Finagle to the airport, they said their goodbyes, and Finagle took the "red eye"<sup>9</sup> home. Nothing happened for a few weeks, but eventually, a rather formal-looking letter arrived from Megalith. It seemed that Kenny had made Finagle a very good offer. Simply put, it was an offer of promotion to Associate Professor without tenure at twice the pay Finagle was currently receiving at Façade.

After a low whistle, Finagle sat down rather hastily and said to himself, "I guess I was on the job market after all." In a few months, he found himself at Megalith.

But the years went by and, after three years, Finagle applied for, and received tenure, albeit with a “warning shot” from the Tenure and Promotion Committee noting that his research was merely “sufficient.” The committee observed that Finagle had not developed a stream of “programmatically research,” but, rather, bounced from topic to topic, much as Finagle himself had explained before being hired. The caution from the committee was that such a record may not be deemed worthy of promotion to full professor when the time came for consideration. Also, over the years, Finagle’s friend Tom took a job at a different university, and some of the older faculty retired. John Kenny was ousted as dean by the faculty for being ineffective and was replaced by Frank Caine.

Living in a faculty with Caine became Finagle’s second “location” problem. What can we tell you about Caine? He had several rather odd convictions. First and foremost, he saw faculty members as employees and *dispensable* employees at that. He believed that, while having a PhD mattered a bit, what mattered much more was the ability to do paid consulting, and, frankly, obedience – and the more complete the obedience the better. He enforced his convictions using short-term contracts, giving poor performance ratings to those out of favor, and denigrating true accomplishments, arguing “...while accomplishments are ‘facts,’ the ratings of those accomplishments are evaluations.”<sup>10</sup> Having no real obligation for research or teaching, Caine devoted a significant amount of his time to becoming an expert on the *University Regulations*, again arguing that his extensive knowledge of these rules could be used to intimidate any aggrieved faculty, who would usually have only a cursory knowledge of the *Regulations* and so a vague idea of their interpretation. In short, Caine had no trouble subscribing to Machiavelli’s suggestion that it’s better to be feared than loved.<sup>11</sup>

Now another charming failing of the young, and Finagle was young, is the unshakable belief the world is, or at least should be, fair. And so it was that Finagle, after being announced by Ms. Jackson, Caine’s administrative assistant, knocked on his door. “Hello Frank, may I sit down?”

“No, actually, I’ve only got a few minutes for you. It’s a busy day.”

“Ah, then I’ll get straight to my point. You’re familiar with my performance since I’ve been at Megalith?”

“I am.”

“Well Frank, as you might know, while I’m happy being an associate professor, I have to apply for promotion this year unless I put it off for a year or two. While the Tenure and Promotion Committee’s recommendation has some influence on the Academic Vice-President’s decision, your recommendation is critical. Knowing my record, can you support me for promotion?”

At this point, Caine, looking up from the document on his desk, smiled wolfishly and said, “Of course I can Ian.”

Finagle thanked him and backed out of the room. Now you might think it odd that Finagle would ask such a question, but it gets to the heart of the third “location” problem, one anchored in time. One of the other peculiar requirements of the *University Regulations* was Clause 126 (c) “Methods Tenure and Promotion Committees Shall Use.” This clause said:

*In order to ensure fairness, consistency, and uniformity in Tenure and Promotion decisions the named Committee and the Dean of the Faculty shall evaluate all candidates within the Faculty, subject to such Assessment, against the records of all other candidates being assessed in the same category in the same academic year.*

Simply put, in the year he applied, Finagle’s record would be compared to all the other folks in the faculty being considered for promotion to professor. This was problematic as Finagle found out a few weeks later, when he received his *Tentative Rejection* letter. In a close vote, the Tenure and Promotion Committee had recommended his promotion, but Caine had soundly rejected it. Part of Caine’s reasoning was as follows:

*While Dr. Finagle has a marginally acceptable teaching record for a professor and has done acceptable service for the faculty and the university, I deem his performance in the area of research to be unacceptable for promotion to the rank of professor at this time.*

Finagle had to read the letter twice before the meaning sank in. While the title of the letter was *Tentative Rejection*, nothing at Megalith was as permanent as this tentative decision. The word *tentative* and the convoluted appeal process were there simply to create the illusion of fairness and to give the aggrieved a chance, formally, to squawk.

Finagle finally tracked Caine down in the Faculty Lounge, “Caine, I want to talk to you. Here or your office?”

“Here’s fine,” said Caine casually while two junior faculty he had been talking with slunk out of the Lounge and hastily closed the door.

“What’s the meaning of this rejection!?! You said you’d support me. Why did you lie to me? And you know as well as I do that I’m a great teacher. All my evaluations say so. And I’m always doing research to improve my teaching.”

“For the greater good.”

“‘For the greater good’? What is that supposed to mean?”

“Cassias Font was up for promotion to professor as well. You know him I suppose?”

“Only in passing. I guess he publishes a lot, *and* he gives you a very hard time at our monthly faculty meetings.”

“Exactly. Because he’s disruptive, it’s my pleasure to ensure that he’s not promoted. And he *seems* to be an extremely productive researcher and a good teacher too. That posed a bit of a problem for me.”

“What on earth does that have to do with *me*?”

“It all comes down to the ‘comparison clause’ in the rules. Fortunately, if I rated your teaching as ‘Marginally Acceptable,’ as good as it is, I can easily rate his teaching as ‘Totally Unacceptable.’ And, of course, if I say his research is ‘Marginally Acceptable,’ I can easily rate yours as ‘Totally Unacceptable.’ Then I’m on solid grounds with both evaluations. And Finagle, your research *is* unacceptable: it doesn’t have any focus or consistency to it, and you don’t publish a lot. You just use what you find out for teaching your undergraduate students.”

“*What’s wrong with that!*”

“It doesn’t get us any attention. So, I’ve killed two birds with one stone, don’t you see?”

“But why lie to me?”

“Oh, if you’d have withdrawn, my case against Font would have been so much weaker, and he may have been promoted.”

“I’ll appeal.”

“So? Go ahead and appeal. I’ll win. I reviewed your tenure assessment, and you were warned then that your research probably would not be up to snuff for promotion to professor.” Caine looked away, picked up a journal, and started to read.

Finagle, after being ignored for several minutes, muttered “What a jackass,” left the room, and headed to the Faculty Club for the aforementioned coffee.

Now, a few days later, and after much soul-searching, Finagle knocked on the office door of his friend George “Dusty” Rhodes, who as it happens, was a member of the Tenure and Promotion Committee.

“Hi Dusty, got a minute?”

“Ah, sure; let me buy you a coffee and we’ll find a quiet spot.”

A bit later, “Dusty, I don’t want to put you in a tough spot; I know what happens in the T&P Committee is supposed to be confidential, but I really got played by Caine. He turned down my promotion and lied to me as well. At least *he’s* consistent, but what the *heck’s* the point of a split vote in the Committee? I’m a great teacher and I publish some stuff too. What happened?”

Dusty, ensuring no one was within earshot, sighed, “Yeah, the Committee’s supposedly confidential but around here confidential means telling only one person at a time.<sup>12</sup> [After a short pause] I can’t speak for Caine, but as far as the Committee’s concerned, you’re collateral damage. Some of the guys desperately wanted to keep on Caine’s good side, and they were terrified of what he’d do next. So, they went along with just about anything he said, and he was adamant about getting rid of Font.”

“I know Caine wants Font out, but how could he? I mean from what little I know, Font’s a publishing machine, and lots of my students say he’s a good teacher. So, I don’t see how Caine could, given Font’s record.”

“Font looks good on paper, and he’s also into consulting, so you’d think he’s the total package. But it didn’t turn out that way.”

“It didn’t?”

“Nope. When we looked at Font’s CV,<sup>13</sup> he hadn’t listed the names of two Committee members as co-recipients of a couple of major grants he received, even though they’d worked on them. Ditto with a couple of reports stemming from those grants. Caine, and the guys who were left off the grants, insisted we review all of Font’s grants, publications, and presentations. So, we did some digging, cheered on by Caine as the Chair of the Committee.”

“I can see how he’d be into digging deeper. What’d you find?”

“Turns out that Font left his co-authors off several papers listed in his CV to make it seem he was the only author. He’d also self-plagiarized a lot by submitting basically the same work under different titles to different places. Sooo.... while on paper his productivity looked good, there was lots of double counting.”

“But why didn’t the committee members who weren’t Caine’s buddies just say that and back me?”

“Impatience, in part. When Caine insisted that we dig deeper, we gathered up Font’s publications, the ‘evidence’ against him, ourselves. But the *Collective Agreement* says we had to ask Font to *provide* the publications himself for our review to be legitimate. And once we found out what was going on, we weren’t sure what to do. So, the final decision was to say that Font’s research was “unsatisfactory” without going into the gory details. And you had listed fewer publications in your CV than he did.”

“But why not just admit the procedural error and ask Font to provide the publications himself?”

“Some of us made that suggestion. But Caine had Font where he wanted him, and since he was the guy pushing for us to dig up the publications ourselves...well. Anyway, between the guys who’d go along with anything and the guys who were angry that they’d been left off as co-authors, Caine had the votes to go ahead. To be consistent, those guys voted against you too. Collateral damage.”

“And the split vote gave Caine even more justification to rate me as *unacceptable* in research?”

“I’m afraid so Ian.”

“Well, at least I know where it went off the rails. I’ve just got to decide what to do next.”

## POST-SCRIPT

Now two things you should know: The first is that Font appealed Caine’s decision. When this appeal was turned down, he (successfully) applied to several other universities. Font was gone, with a promotion to Full Professor, within a year. The second is despite Caine’s *confidence* and use of *political persuasion*, he had made several other procedural errors, errors serious enough that the next year, when Finagle applied again, he was promoted – over Caine’s objections we might add.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How is the issue of lying relevant in this case study? Who lied to others? To themselves? In what ways?
2. What rules got in the way of Finagle’s promotion? How did Caine use them to get his way? How might they be functional for the university (i.e., what positive purpose might they serve)? What is the potential downside of such rules?
3. What would motivate a university to decouple the rank of associate professor from the granting of tenure?
4. Did Finagle equate a ‘job title’ (Associate Professor, Full Professor) with job progress? Explain.
5. Was Finagle’s choice to be a ‘Local’ a good one? What are the implications of his choice for ‘being seen’ and by whom? How does this fit with the ‘teaching vs. research’ debate?
6. What role do visibility and power play in tenure and promotion decisions?
7. What experiences have you had in the tenure and promotion process (if applicable)?
8. What are some general conclusions/major lessons that you can draw from this case study?

## ENDNOTES

1. Latin for a voyage, a passage, or an academic curriculum. It also translates as “Career.” <http://www.latin-dictionary.net/>. For Finagle it could well be *Cursum Tenere* (To hold one's course) see [https://www.ultralingua.com/onlinedictionary/dictionary#src\\_lang=Latin&dest\\_lang=English&query=CURSUS](https://www.ultralingua.com/onlinedictionary/dictionary#src_lang=Latin&dest_lang=English&query=CURSUS). It can also refer to a Neolithic structure most likely used for ceremonial competitions. A definition that also is very appropriate for our case. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cursus>
2. The original seems to be a Russian joke under Communism: “The principle of the state capitalism of the period of transition to communism: the authorities pretend they are paying wages, workers pretend they are working. Alternatively, “So long as the bosses pretend to pay us, we will pretend to work.” This joke persisted essentially unchanged through the 1980s.” Cited from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian\\_political\\_jokes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_political_jokes)
3. A standard practice of “Recruitment Events” is having the candidate give a lecture, usually on some of his or her current research, which is often open to all members of the academic community. This lecture is then followed by questions from the assembled faculty. At Megalith such lectures were referred to as “presentations.”
4. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One-upmanship>
5. The lead author first heard this term used by the late Bob House, circa 1975.
6. More can be learned about Ian’s friend in *Past Perfect* by Tolliver, J. and Grimard, C. M. (2008).
7. For the history of this quotation see <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/10/25/more/>
8. In general, a “local” is interested in doing well in his/her university while a “cosmopolitan” is interested in their reputation in the academic community at large. A multitude of definitions of this term exist, however. See Coryell, Sehin, & Pefia, C. (2018) or Gouldner (1957).
9. This is a flight that leaves late in the evening and arrives at its destination in the early morning.
10. For example, “Facts don’t do anything by themselves. You have to gather or generate the facts, assess them, interpret them, and present them in a clear and meaningful way. You speak for the facts.” cited from *The Facts Don’t Speak for Themselves, How to Give a Persuasive Technical Presentation*. Whitt Communications. <http://wittcom.com/the-facts-dont-speak-for-themselves-how-to-give-a-persuasive-technical-presentation/>.
11. “Let me conclude, then – returning to the issue of being feared and loved – that since men love at their own pleasure and fear at the pleasure of the prince, the wise prince should build his foundation upon that which is his own, not upon that which belongs to others...” Machiavelli, N. & Bondanella, P. E. (2005:59) <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzI1NzgZMF9fQU41?sid=37453214-ecb6-4687-8636-db1f0a65ed00@sdv-sessmgr04&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>
12. The source of this saying is unknown to the authors. The lead author first heard it from Dr. J. Downey.
13. *Curriculum Vitae*: “Latin for ‘course of life’...a written overview of someone’s life’s work (academic formation, publications, qualifications, etc.)” Cited from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curriculum\\_vitae](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curriculum_vitae)

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Instructors may write to the authors for a copy of the detailed teaching notes.