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A Delicate Balance. Responsible Evaluation, Tenure Review, and the Pursuit of Institutional Innovation

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Abstract
Evaluation is central to current science policy debates and is often perceived as a barrier to making research more socially relevant. At the same time, some universities have sought to become more socially embedded and responsive to public demands. In this study, focusing on a US university with a strong innovative profile, we examine how the tenure and promotion review process accommodates an institutional shift toward interdisciplinarity and social impact. Our findings, based on documentary analysis and interviews, show that the new institutional goals permeated the process without the need for reforms in criteria or procedures. Tenure review is not necessarily an obstacle to the balance that the institution should strike between tradition and innovation in order to present itself as a new model for American higher education. Our results also underscore the importance of a responsible evaluation agenda that is sensitive to diverse contexts for its discourse to resonate effectively.

Introduction

Reform movements in research assessment have gained momentum in recent years, exemplified by initiatives such as the DORA declaration, the Leiden manifesto, and the Coalition for Responsible Research Assessment (ACSB 2013; Hicks et al. 2015; CoARA 2022). Originally focused on the responsible use of research metrics such as the Journal Impact Factor, they have recently broadened their agenda to include broader discussions of the negative consequences that the current evaluation regimes create for teaching, integrity, or openness. In particular, CoARA is a coalition that brings together research organizations interested in evaluation reform and provides a space for sharing best practices and innovative approaches. Common to these initiatives is a recognition of the importance of evaluation in providing signals about desirable outcomes or career paths. Evaluation is not regarded as a purely technical field; rather, it involves political and strategic considerations about the kind of research and knowledge that should be promoted. Even if there is some agreement at a broader level, the implementation of this agenda must consider different geographical and institutional contexts. For example, Rushforth and De Rijcke (2024) point out that the responsible research assessment agenda has not permeated the United States to the same extent

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as it has in Europe.

In this study, we sought to explore how changes in evaluation are integrated into a broader process of institutional change. We conducted a case study of Arizona State University (ASU), a higher education institution that is engaged in a progressive process of institutional reform that has inclusion and local embeddedness as part of its core values. Since 2002, ASU has been characterized by an institutional model that aims to broaden access to university studies while concurrently pursuing research excellence linked to public problems.

We expected the university to emphasize its institutional mission in the context of evaluation criteria and practices. This would counter the homogenizing perspective driven by research metrics and the excellence-oriented model of research evaluation. Our main research questions were (1) To what extent are innovative institutional goals and values represented in evaluation criteria and practices? (2) How are institutional priorities and disciplinary cultures reconciled in evaluation?

Through document analysis, regulations, and interviews with the leadership and faculty members who serve on evaluation committees, we aimed to assess the extent to which institutional innovations translate into changes in the evaluation of scholars. As will become clear in the course of the study, the ways in which the characteristics of the institution were present were more subtle and informal than expected. In the end, our findings challenged the central role of evaluation in transforming scholarly practice that initiatives such as CoARA place on it.

In the following two sections, we address the background discussions on academic careers, research evaluation, tenure review and institutional models in higher education. Next, we discuss ASU's model and its trajectory, as well as the formalities of the tenure and promotion process. Subsequently, we analyze three aspects that emerged from the fieldwork: the challenge of harmonizing criteria across levels within the institution, the difficulties in incorporating criteria related to interdisciplinarity and social impact, and the tension between being a 'different' institution and aspiring to compete with more traditional universities. Finally, we place the results of our work in the context of broader discussions about the role of evaluation in promoting change in scientific practice.

Academic careers, research evaluation, and tenure review

Faculty evaluation processes within individual universities cannot be viewed in isolation from broader evaluation systems. Drawing on European case studies, Whitley and Gläser (2007) developed the concept of Research Evaluation Systems (RES), shedding light on the impact of evaluation on institutional funding. RES also facilitate an examination of how universities align their structures and priorities with the desired outcomes outlined in the evaluation guidelines. National evaluation systems also operate at the individual level. In Latin America, South Africa, and New Zealand, centralized systems evaluate the profiles of individual academics, assigning them nationally recognized categories (Vasen et al., 2023). This is part of a general trend toward the economization of research outputs (Kulczycki 2023). Economic value can be defined broadly, extending beyond commercialization. In European countries with Performance-Based Research Funding Systems (PRFS), for instance, research outputs translate into increased resource allocations from the State (Hicks 2012). In other contexts, indirect administrative or infrastructure costs may be reimbursed through research grants from

foundations or government agencies (Ledford 2014). As a result, research activities have increasingly become strategic for higher education institutions.

A contentious issue lies in the measurement and evaluation of scientific and technological production. Traditionally, methodologies have relied on disciplinary peer review, initially for assessing articles and publications, and later expanded to individual grants, careers, and institutions (Baldwin 2020). However, there has been a steady rise in the use of metrics to analyze and evaluate scientific production in recent years. While bibliometrics initially aimed for descriptive-explanatory purposes, it has evolved into a crucial tool for evaluating and benchmarking individuals, groups, institutions, and countries. This surge in metrics, dubbed the 'metric tide' in the UK, has sparked significant controversy (Martin 2011; Hammarfelt and Hallonsten 2023). Many scientists viewed citation numbers and journal indexing as suitable proxies for measuring scientific quality, a sentiment echoed by institutions seeking clear benchmarking criteria. However, criticisms abound regarding the adverse effects of this standardization. Citation practices vary widely across disciplinary cultures, necessitating contextualization based on thematic nuances and regional inequalities. However, this contextualization is not consistently performed. In response, movements advocating for academic evaluation reform emphasize the cautious and judicious use of metrics, prioritizing understanding metrics within their context rather than at face value (Rushforth and Hammarfelt 2023).

Evaluation criteria have been the subject of comparative analyses (Trower 2002; Alperin et al. 2019; McKiernan et al. 2019; Rice et al. 2020; Makula 2024), which highlight the dominance of more classical evaluation criteria over the public and open dimensions of science and the explicit mention of metrics in tenure documents in the US and Canada has also been documented (McKiernan et al. 2019). Furthermore, substantial disciplinary differences can be observed, with economics being one of the disciplines where metrics carry more weight (Hekman and Mortan, 2020; Reymert 2021; Langfeldt, Reymert, and Asknes 2021).

Evaluation schemes differ greatly across various higher education systems (Musselin 2009; Kulczycki 2023). In the United States, career assessment predominantly revolves around the employing institution, resembling a model closer to that of organizational or corporate employees. Conversely, in Europe, the evaluation framework more closely resembles a civil servant model, where the perspectives of disciplinary communities carry greater weight than the demands of the employing institution (Finkelstein 2014). This diversity in evaluation approaches reflects the distinct organizational and cultural contexts within which academic careers unfold.

Tenure is an institution in constant debate in the context of American higher education. According to the American Association of University Professors, 'a tenured appointment is an indefinite appointment that can be terminated only for cause or under extraordinary circumstances such as financial exigency and program discontinuation.' The first formal elaborations can be traced back to the 1940s, when an early statement on academic freedom and tenure was published by the AAUP and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAUP, n. d.). Tenure combines two very sensitive issues: the protection of academic freedom and job security. Between 1950 and 1970, there was a period of prosperity in which tenured positions proliferated, creating an 'assumptive world' in which the most valued profile was that of the disciplinary specialist who published in peer-reviewed journals (Chait 2002). Criticism, however, has always been present. In the context of the political turmoil of the late 1960s, professors were seen as unpatriotic for opposing the Vietnam War,

and their privilege was put into question. In the late 1990s, in the context of massive layoffs throughout the labor market, tenure began to be seen as an outdated privilege. More recently, Republican lawmakers in some states, such as Texas and Florida, have again proposed limiting or eliminating tenure, based on the idea that it is an inefficient way to run universities and that it promotes ‘liberal indoctrination’ (Potts 2023; Daniels 2023).

Tenure plays a central role in various aspects of young scholars' professional and personal lives, from their publishing practices to their personal identities (Alleman, Cilburn Allen, and Nelson 2024; Tripodi et al. 2024; Perlmutter 2010). Academics navigate their careers in an uncertain context in which universities seek to redefine or consolidate their institutional identity based on ambiguous concepts such as excellence, impact, or relevance (Smit, Burghardt, and van Eck 2024). Consequently, the demands on tenure-track faculty are increasing and often unclear or contradictory. Young faculty are caught between collegial and managerial cultures and face an ‘overloaded plate’ problem. In addition to the expectations of the prestige economy, they must meet institutional demands for teaching and service and a growing emphasis on the public relevance of academic work. More and more demands are added, but the old ones remain, generating mixed signals, anxiety, and burnout (Rice and Sorcinelli 2002).

Institutional innovation and normative models in higher education

The link between higher education systems and the production of scientific knowledge has exhibited significant variation on a global scale. Clark (1995) provides a historical perspective by tracing the various influences that contributed to shape the American research university model. The U.S. higher education system is distinguished by its robust inclination toward institutional diversity and the expansion of its funding sources. Drawing primarily from the British and German traditions, early colleges in New England were modeled after the residential systems of Oxford and Cambridge. The influence of Humboldt’s ideals arrived in the U.S. with the establishment of the first research universities in the late 19th century, which combined features of both traditions. The emphasis on research did not entail the replacement of colleges and undergraduate education but rather the addition of a new layer: the graduate school (Wittrock 1985; Geiger 2004).

The US research university has emerged as the predominant model worldwide for structuring higher education institutions and has been acclaimed as a normative paradigm (Altbach 2011). A conceptual spin-off of the research university model (‘World Class Universities’) has been championed by multilateral lending agencies and boosted by world university rankings, especially for the developing world (Altbach and Balan 2007; Hazelkorn 2015). This model is depicted as an evolution of the North American research university, tailored for a globalized era (Mohrman, Ma, and Baker 2008). However, the concept of a singular aspirational university model can be problematic, potentially diverting attention from initiatives geared toward addressing local and regional needs and fostering greater community impact and engagement (Deem et al. 2008). ‘Entrepreneurial’ universities represent another normative model that has sparked considerable debate, which is distinguished by a diversified funding base, strong links with industry and other external stakeholders and an integrated entrepreneurial culture (Clark 1998).

ASU President Michael Crow had these earlier developments in mind when he reflected on the

importance of institutional innovation in higher education. In his latest book, *The Fifth Wave*, he claims that 'designs of public universities were initially legalistic, bureaucratic, and faculty-centric—as opposed to client- or student-centric. Subject to conserver models of organizational behavior, universities thus exhibited only minimal rates of adaptation and change over long periods of time' (2020: 363). Although Crow does not explicitly make this connection, his concept of institutional innovation can be related to work on the formation of organizational identities in the university (Gioia and Thomas 1996; Macdonald 2013; Stensaker 2014; Franssen, Borlaug, and Hylmö 2023). From this perspective, an initial distinction can be made between two approaches to organizational identity, one essentialist and the other strategic. In the first approach, organizational identity could be defined and understood as reflecting a 'true' organizational character, while in the second, it can be seen as a resource that can be applied as part of the strategic positioning of a given organization. The approach taken also influences the extent to which leadership can manipulate and transform this image. From an essentialist perspective, organizational identity is seen as an expression of the institution's culture and therefore less malleable. The strategic view, on the other hand, holds that this identity is not necessarily so deeply rooted in culture and can be modified through institutional communication, symbology, and branding.

A final related aspect is how these institutional models can shape the behavior of researchers. As a general rule, Gläser (2019) argues that there are four mechanisms to influence researchers: coercion, equipping, inducement, and reinterpretation of the situation. The reward system associated with evaluation mechanisms can be considered within the third group, as a form of inducement. In our case study, we will examine the extent to which an evaluation reform was the chosen path to influence the research practices of academics, or whether other mechanisms were privileged.

Arizona State and the *New American University*

In this section, we intend to outline ASU's institutional project and provide a better understanding of why this institution was chosen for this study. ASU achieved R1 status as a Research University by the Carnegie Foundation's classification in 1994. However, it was in 2002, when Michael Crow assumed the presidency, that ASU began a profound transformation. Crow, a political scientist and science policy specialist and a former executive vice provost at Columbia University, introduced a new radical vision for ASU, aspiring for it to become a prototype for the next generation of American universities (Crow and Dabars 2015).

Crow's concept underscores the necessity for a fresh generation of universities and posits that ASU can embody the idea of the *New American University*. He argues against the notion that the Research University model, as epitomized by Harvard, Yale, or MIT, should be regarded as the sole or exclusive desirable model for institutions in the United States. The association of excellence and institutional success has given rise to a phenomenon known as 'Harvardization', which has, in turn, stifled institutional innovation and limited the exploration of alternative approaches. This trend has fostered a somewhat dogmatic perspective that is overly reverent of tradition, resulting in a proliferation of institutions that often appear indistinguishable and uninspired clones that aim to become world-class universities.

In his account, even though ASU had already attained the status of an R1 institution, it was often perceived as just another generic, mediocre, and also-ran state university. Furthermore, its reputation as a 'party school' did not align with the new image that Crow sought to cultivate.

The New American University model is built on three core pillars: access, excellence, and impact (Randles 2017). Regarding access, ASU continues to admit all high school diploma holders who meet the qualifications and intends to mirror Arizona's socioeconomic diversity within its student body. The second pillar, excellence, underscores ASU's determination to elevate and sustain national academic quality standards across its various colleges and schools and to expand access to federal research funding. The third pillar, impact, emphasizes ASU's collaboration with its local community to address critical 21st-century issues.

The vision is embodied in the university charter, officially approved in 2014. The charter articulates ASU's stance on access, excellence, and impact: *ASU is a comprehensive public research university, measured not by whom it excludes, but by whom it includes and how they succeed; advancing research and discovery of public value; and assuming fundamental responsibility for the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the communities it serves*. Complementing this charter are the 'design aspirations', which offer a more detailed outline of the university's institutional objectives. These aspirations are dynamic and continue to evolve (ASU, 2023a, see Figure 1).

Figure 1. ASU's Design Aspirations
Credit: Photograph of a poster captured by the author in a dining room at the Tempe campus, September 2021.

A fundamental aspect of ASU's institutional vision is its commitment to interdisciplinarity. From the outset, Crow argued that for the university to effectively address contemporary public challenges, it was imperative to reconsider its internal organizational structure. The response to this challenge involved significant restructuring efforts. Over 60 departments and units were either dissolved or merged, and new schools oriented toward interdisciplinary topics were established. These include schools like Sustainability, Earth and Space Exploration, Human

Evolution and Social Change, and the Future of Innovation in Society. Concurrently, the barriers that hindered collaboration between disciplines were lowered. Processes for facilitating joint appointments and the supervision of students from various academic units were streamlined, fostering a more collaborative and interdisciplinary environment.

The beginning of the administration was marked by a disruptive approach, akin to wanting to 'break everything with a sledgehammer.' As noted by a dean in an interview, individuals who arrived at ASU with enthusiasm for the new model were 'willing to work in a place where things could change drastically at a moment's notice' (Stripling 2010). On this point, a professor acknowledged concerns that 'some worry that high velocity change is the end, not the means to an end' and that this environment could sometimes appear chaotic and stressful (Guthrie et al. 2015). The journey through this transformation was far from pain-free. Although tenure and tenure-track positions remained safeguarded, the process ultimately led to approximately 1800 individuals losing their jobs (Parr 2014; Warner 2015).

Contextual factors also facilitated experimentation. The state of Arizona is characterized by relatively low levels of regulation. This circumstance enabled the university to expand its online education initiatives without the necessity of seeking approval from a regulatory agency or accreditation board (Guthrie et al. 2015). Furthermore, ASU's peripheral position within the American higher education landscape also played a role. A professor who had previously been associated with MIT noted that, unlike top-tier universities, ASU's absence of established prestige created an environment where everyone was more open to new approaches (Stripling 2010). In a sense, there was less at stake, which contributed to a greater openness to innovation and transformation.

To achieve the level of institutional innovation he envisions, Crow advocates a managerialist and top-down approach to university administration, often likened to 'running the school like a CEO' (Theil 2008). He prefers to term this style of management the 'academic enterprise,' distinguishing it from the more bureaucratic modes of overseeing public higher education institutions (Crow and Dabars 2020). This approach to university management aligns with concepts such as the triple helix (Etzkowitz et al. 2008) and entrepreneurial universities (Clark 1998). It underscores the significance of generating resources through intellectual property and embraces a pragmatic outlook on forming partnerships with a wide array of stakeholders to diversify income sources.

At the beginning, there was indeed some bewilderment about the depth and scope of the change. Was it a genuine transformation or just a rebranding effort? There is some evidence that the model has been successful in a number of respects. Michael Crow remains a prominent figure in the realm of U.S. higher education. Enrollment at ASU has consistently grown. Between 2003 and 2019, the undergraduate student body increased by 126%, from 42,877 to 96,727, with 34.5% of these students participating in online programs. Graduate and professional student enrollment rose by 84% during the same period, growing from 12,614 to 23,252, with 46.6% engaged in online learning (Crow and Dabars 2020). Importantly, this surge in the student population did not come at the expense of a decline in research activities. On the contrary, ASU's research expenditures have shown significant growth since Crow's tenure began in 2002. Starting at around $100 million, research expenditures have increased to $678 million by 2021. ASU currently ranks #6 in research expenditures among 750 institutions without a medical school (Parr 2014; ASU 2022). Additionally, ASU has claimed the #1 spot in innovation in the U.S. News and World Report ranking for nine consecutive years and has

been ranked #1 in global impact by Times Higher Education (ASU 2023b). Furthermore, the university recently secured membership in the Association of American Universities (AAU), an organization that brings together leading research universities in the United States and Canada (AAU 2023).

The university continues to evolve dynamically. The model is portrayed as an ongoing, open-ended project characterized by a heuristic and pragmatic approach. In recent times, particular emphasis has been placed on the notions of impact and social embeddedness (Williams 2022). Notably, in 2023, a ninth design imperative, *Practice Principled Innovation*, was introduced. Simultaneously, ASU announced the establishment of a School of Medicine, building upon a previous partnership with the Mayo Clinic (Hupka 2023; ASU 2023c). This expansion not only broadens its educational offerings but also positions the university to pursue increased federal research funding.

Navigating institutional change: The strategic significance of tenure and promotion review

Our case study at Arizona State University analyzed the extent to which the evaluation of academics is connected to innovative changes at the institutional level. Is evaluation perceived as a strategic tool for aligning faculty profiles with institutional priorities? We have chosen to focus on the tenure and promotion review process because it determines long-term institutional stakes at the level of human capital. The faculty evaluation process is also very much subject to the tensions of the disciplinary communities that manage the economy of prestige and cannot be imposed from the top down by university leadership.

The methodological approach of this study combined the analysis of university policies and documents with semistructured interviews. Interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, including members of the university's tenure and promotion committee (UTPC), school- and department-level evaluators, and key informants in the university's leadership and administration. A total of 33 interviews were conducted between September and November 2021 with 13 tenure and promotion committee members, 13 school- or department-level reviewers, and seven university leaders and administrators. Evaluators were drawn from the sciences, engineering, humanities, social sciences, and interdisciplinary fields. Interviews were conducted both in person and remotely, with over half conducted face-to-face. Before the start of the conversation, the interviewees were provided with an IRB-reviewed text for review, and verbal consent was obtained. Of the total interviews, 25 were recorded, transcribed, and coded thematically, while data from the remaining 8 were analyzed based on field notes. The documents examined were available on the websites of ASU and the Arizona Board of Regents.

In the next three subsections, we present the results of the fieldwork. First, we examine the mechanics of the process and the articulation between the different levels of assessment. Next, we analyze the ways in which evaluators approach nontraditional candidate profiles. Finally, we discuss how ASU's positioning relative to other institutions is represented within the process.

The charter and the bylaws

The tenure and promotion evaluation process at ASU is governed by policies operating at several levels: state, institutional, school, and departmental. The Arizona Board of Regents

(ABOR) Policy Sections 6-201 and 6-211 govern the basic aspects of the process, such as defining the different types of appointments and specifying which are tenure-eligible. ABOR delegates to each university the definition of the major guidelines for evaluation. At ASU, the norms are codified in the Academic Affairs Manual (ACD), section 506, which establishes the length of the probationary period (6 years) and general criteria for evaluation. In the case of tenure and promotion to associate professor, it states that

> Tenure is awarded on the basis of excellence and the promise of continued excellence, which is measured not only by individual achievement but also by contributions to the academic unit's and university's current and future mission and objectives. (ACD 506-04)
>
> The candidate must have achieved excellence in teaching and instructional activities as well as in research, scholarship and/or creative activities. Service must at least be "satisfactory" or "effective." Academic units in which public service is a central aspect of their mission also may require excellence in public service. (ACD 506-05)

In turn, for promotion from associate to full professor, it is indicated that

> Promotion to full professor must be based on an overall record of excellence in the performance of responsibilities. The candidate must also demonstrate continued effectiveness in teaching, research, scholarship and/or creative activities, and service since the promotion to associate professor and evidence of contributions at a level beyond that reflected in the promotion decision to associate professor. Generally, an overall record of excellence requires national and/or international recognition for scholarly and/or creative achievement. (ACD 506-05)

Although ASU has such a strong institutional project, this orientation is not explicitly reflected in these university-level documents, except for the general idea that the candidate's contribution to institutional missions and goals is also a criterion for granting tenure.

The ACD Policy Manual also outlines the stages of the process, which is similar to that of most research universities in the United States. At the end of the sixth year, assistant professors must submit their portfolios for tenure and promotion to associate professors. In contrast, there are no fixed deadlines for promotion from associate to full professor. This portfolio, which includes a curriculum vitae, a personal statement, and up to four publications or creative materials, is accompanied by a proposal of 10 names of external reviewers. The dossier must also include evidence of teaching excellence, including a summary of student evaluations. The portfolio is then evaluated by several parties, each of which issues a letter or report with its evaluation. First, within the unit or department, by a personnel committee and the chair/director; then, at the school or college level, also by a committee and the dean; then, at the university level, by a tenure and promotion committee; and finally, by the Provost and the President, who make the final decision.

The concrete evaluation criteria are defined by each unit in its bylaws, which are area-specific. The charter and design aspirations of the New American University are not necessarily present in them. As a former school director and UTPC member mentioned:

> The university charter, which states that were socially embedded, we're focused on use inspired research and we act globally and locally, those types of things are rarely in the promotion and tenure bylaws of each unit (I11)

Therefore, the fit between the candidate's profile and the university's institutional project may not be an explicit object of evaluation. As two former UTPC members argue, it is appreciated when it is present, but it is not a decisive factor in the evaluation:

> Strictly speaking, the only thing that's relevant is the unit criteria. So, some people on the committee might say, 'look, community service isn't in the unit criteria. So that's not relevant, that's not what we're here for... That's nice, but we're here to judge whether the candidate has met the unit's criteria' (I10)

> The charter is relatively new and the charter is not reflected in most units' bylaws. So when people talked about the charter and talked about how they were engaging the charter, we applauded that and we were positive about it. But if there was a lack of discussion about the charter, we didn't count it off because it wasn't in the bylaws... I threw a fit at our last college meeting, and I'm like, 'look, if the charter's important to you, put it in the bylaws because then we can metricize it or whatever'. . . (I8)

ASU is a very large and heterogeneous university where all kinds of academic and professional disciplines and cultures co-exist. According to one university staff member, the degree of commitment to the New American University model varies significantly across different academic units:

> I think there are some academic units that perhaps are not as eager to adopt some of those design imperatives as others. So there are some gaps, there are definitely some bylaws that we look at and are like, wow, these are out of step with where we are (I26).

There are nuances to how the university manages these tensions. The interviewees agree that ASU has a much more top-down governance culture than other universities. However, the tenure and promotion process is 'bottom heavy' in the sense that it relies primarily on unit bylaws, faculty members themselves, and reviewers from outside the university. Even if the administration were to push for a change in the bylaws, faculty members are aware that the process of reforming them is heavily dependent on the academics themselves.

> Bylaw revision here is the slowest, slowest glacial change because it is part of faculty governance. So you have to get the unit to make the change, then it has to be approved by the Dean, then it has to go through the Senate. There are so many layers… It's super, super slow. It's unbelievably slow. (I9)

However, university leaders have developed more informal ways of communicating institutional expectations to evaluators that allow them to influence the process without waiting for bylaw reform. The following quote from an academic who was member of committees at the department, school and university level illustrates that there is indeed room for influence from above, irrespective of the bylaws:

> The process, if you look at the bylaws, is still very traditional, so these committees are reinventing the process without the bylaws being updated. How do you do that? At different levels, the administrators say, and sometimes they write, but mostly they *say*, year after year, 'this is what this committee should value', whether or not it is in the bylaws. (I7)

Even in ASU's managerialist context, university reform initiatives must strike a balance between the preservation of some autonomous space for faculty governance and a top-down perspective that facilitates institutional change. The tenure and promotion process is at the intersection of the academic culture of the faculty and the bureaucratic and corporate culture of the administration. Although there is a consensus that ASU has a strong top-down orientation in the context of North American universities, the tenure and promotion process is still very much controlled by academics and the norms that they create. In this sense, a comprehensive reform of tenure review has not been part of the institutional transformation promoted by Crow. However, this does not mean that there has been no reflection on its

function. This administration has sought to make the process as similar as possible to that of the most prestigious universities, and Crow himself has sought to exert influence through his words and the general guidelines that permeate the institutional culture.

This ambivalence about the role of the tenure process can best be understood in the context of a broader tension that permeates the process of university change. On the one hand, the university aspires to get into the most prestigious circuits, such as the AAU[1], and to do well in the various rankings, while at the same time it seeks to present itself as different.

Incorporating innovations: interdisciplinary research and social embeddedness

One of the aspects on which we focused our fieldwork with the evaluators was the way in which panel members addressed the cases of applicants who had an innovative profile, in line with the discourse of the New American University. In this section, we analyze how the tenure review process addresses two of the most important innovations of the New American University model: interdisciplinary research and social impact.

Regarding interdisciplinarity, one concern is that the candidate may have a profile that would not necessarily be valued in the leading research universities. This may come up in the feedback from external reviewers, as two evaluators commented:

> This idea of crossdisciplinarity in research hasn't completely permeated all of the universities in the US. So you'll get letters from a discipline where the person basically says, 'This profile for this candidate is interesting, but it doesn't completely fit what we expect for promotion in our discipline' (I12).
>
> We get a lot of letters now that ASU has a reputation for being interdisciplinary that will say: 'this person is doing really interdisciplinary work. I can see why he or she is at ASU. This wouldn't fly at my traditional department at X, but I think that he or she should get should be promoted at your university'. (I9)

At this point, the university appears to have found functional mechanisms to maneuver the issue. A positive view of interdisciplinary is indeed present in both collegial bodies and in top leadership. The issue is not presented as one of conflict for decision makers. Rather, they emphasize that external evaluators may not share the institutional vision and that 'corrections' need to be made.

> Doing interdisciplinary work isn't a replacement for any other criteria, so to speak. I think it's indirectly in the culture, but not necessarily a criterion by itself. Does that make sense? (I1)
>
> In the committee, there are champions of interdisciplinarity. Nobody has applied to be a champion, there are just enough of us in the university who believe in the process, who raise our voices when we see an injustice that happens to a person who is following exactly what we told him/her to do, even though the evaluation system is still 15, 20 years behind. So those voices are heard, and I think there are some corrections within the committee that happen spontaneously. (I7)

[1] Our case study was developed before ASU became an AAU member in 2023.

This does not mean that interdisciplinary work is valued simply because it is interdisciplinary. The most common criticism that arises is the risk of dispersion or lack of focus, which can be attributed to a researcher who is on the edge of disciplinary fields. In such cases, it can be difficult to distinguish 'between somebody who is doing something really interesting and innovative and new, and somebody who is just sort of flailing around, trying one thing and trying something else' (I29). Overall, interdisciplinary research seems to be accepted and there do not seem to be major hindrances to its development. This can be seen as an achievement because significant barriers in the tenure process have been described in other leading universities (Mäkinen et al. 2024).

In contrast to the perspective found on interdisciplinary research, assessing a candidate's social impact and embeddedness is less consensual. Although it is a topic that is frequently mentioned in the New American University discourse, its scope and meaning are much more ambiguous. A first difficulty arises because it is not clear whether impact and community engagement should be evaluated as part of teaching, research, or service. This is relevant because, according to the ACD regulations, service is only expected to be 'satisfactory' for the award of tenure, while research and scholarship are expected to be 'excellent'.

On the other hand, another recurring theme was potential conflicts of interest or loyalties. Evaluators question the extent to which applicants' engagement with these external actors benefits the university, rather than just the applicant and the third parties involved. This is mentioned regardless of whether the impact is through commercialization of the research or impact on the community:

> If somebody says, 'I have five patents, and the incubator has helped them get those patents', we see exactly what have you done with it. Have you generated external revenue? Have you used that revenue to hire postdocs and PhD students, or is it something that has just benefited the applicant only? (I13)

> You've gotta stop making community gardens here. Stop making so many gardens. Making gardens is good. The communities love you. But your colleagues and the rest of the university is not going to love you. If you don't start spitting your time and spending at least a big part of your time doing something that academically is more productive… (I5).

When evaluating research outputs, a broad dissemination of results and engagement with a wider community of practitioners can be considered a form of impact. In the case of education, for example, this could be related to the production of teaching materials or the mobilization of knowledge for educators. As the following two quotes show, 'corrections' are introduced into the process so as not to harm those with less traditional profiles.

> We had a professor, I think it was French or Spanish and she came up for promotion to full professor, and the most significant piece of work she had was a textbook. Now we would not normally promote a faculty member to full professor on the basis of a textbook, but in this particular case, this book had been adopted by over 275 curricula in the United States. Clearly, this person was having an impact on the instruction and the learning of this language. And we felt that was really a remarkable contribution and ultimately promoted that individual to full professor. (I27)

> Even if a person external to ASU doesn't think that impact or social embeddedness might matter, the committee always resituates the arguments in the ASU context saying: 'this actually does matter'. (I3)

However, there is still some skepticism about how to evaluate this aspect, for which there are no clear or widely accepted indicators. There is a global trend toward using narratives, as exemplified by the REF impact case studies in the UK. In any case, narratives are not

necessarily sufficiently detailed to be considered as solid evidence of impact:

> If you just rely on stories, you can have zero substance to your scholarship, but you can tell a good story and your colleagues will sort of support that. So, storytelling alone allows you to say: 'I had a major impact because I wrote a tweet and somebody retweeted it.' And you can recreate a story around that… Narratives are really important because they provide context. But they've gotta be tied to substantive evidence for them to work… (I15).

We can now revisit Rice and Sorcinelli's idea of the 'overloaded plate,' according to which academics have more and more demands to meet. It is no longer sufficient to perform adequately in the traditional areas of research, teaching, and service. The following response illustrates how most of those we interviewed felt about this:

> If they don't do any of the engagement or policy implications and they just keep their head down, they're a good teacher, they're publishing, they're getting grants. It's not gonna hurt them if they don't have any of these additional metrics that I think are aligned with our charter. If they meet the criteria, nobody is saying 'this person hasn't turned a publication into a policy brief or something like that'. (I11)

The plate is overloaded but also unbalanced. Ultimately, there are no great incentives for being a nontraditional academic from the viewpoint of the evaluation system. At most, what the system has achieved with its 'corrections' is that there are no penalties for those who choose to engage in less conventional activities. In this sense, the message seems to be as follows: 'You can be a traditional academic here. And it's great if you also engage in activities related to our institutional goals. We will not punish you for doing so'. Looking at the New American University project, one might have expected a stronger incentive toward the nontraditional. To explain why this is not the case, it is necessary to examine how ASU seeks to position itself in the context of other universities.

'It's not Harvard, it's not Yale, but it's pretty innovative'

The process of selecting external reviewers and interpreting their letters is key to understanding how ASU presents itself relative to other universities. Both the applicant and the unit director (or dean) compile a list of 10 names, and reviewers are invited on an equal basis from these lists. There are, however, certain minimum requirements that reviewers must meet, namely that they be tenured faculty members at a peer or aspirational peer institution (and full professors if evaluating for promotion). The list of institutions is defined by ABOR and includes AAU members as aspirational peers and high-quality public universities in the United States as peers.

This list of institutions is not related to the particular nature of ASU's institutional approach, but rather to the usual standards by which universities are measured in the United States. This is consistent with the role assigned to external evaluators in the process. Committee members point out that external reviewers 'are the ones who can really tell you what's required in the discipline' (I6) and that they provide a contextualized evaluation of the author's publications and contributions.' You rely on these external reviewers to say: 'these are the top 10% journals in our field'(I11). External reviewers are regarded as the bearers of the standards of disciplinary communities, which continue to hold a fundamental weight in postgraduate education and research:

> I and most of my colleagues across the university have been trained in a discipline, have been hired in a discipline, published in a discipline, and invited to conferences in a discipline. Our market value, as it were, is determined by what we do within our discipline. And so the incentives are all disciplinary… (I10)

The importance of external letters cannot be underestimated. They were mentioned constantly during the interviews as a key element in the evaluation, since their review is not influenced by internal institutional politics, as can be the case with the other letters or reports.

> If you have seven letters come back and you have three or four or five that basically don't say outright, the person should be tenured. That ends up going in the letter that goes up to the, to the Dean's office, and then, you know, beyond. And so those letters carry considerable weight all the way up. (I22)

In the external letters, in addition to a general assessment of the quality of the candidate's work and his/her standing in the field, the reviewers must indicate whether they would recommend tenure or promotion at their home institution and whether they would recommend tenure or promotion at ASU. In this way, the comparison between what the reviewers consider to be the criteria of one institution and those of the other is made explicit. Thus, 'corrections' are necessary so that the standards of other institutions are not directly imported into ASU, especially if they run counter to what the institution is trying to accomplish.

> We ask this explicit question: 'the person under consideration could get tenure at your university?' If the person writes from Caltech or Harvard, and we are Arizona State, often they either don't answer out of courtesy, or they answer negatively, but they also say, 'within the system that you're describing to me, this person is valuable, is being successful, but we have another system where we don't value this, this, and this' (I7).

> We have gotten any number of letters that say: 'This person is great. They'd never get tenure at our institution, but it's absolutely clear that they're doing exactly what you want them to do.' (I14).

As the previous quotes highlight, some external reviewers distinguish between the criteria of their own institution and those of ASU, but this does not prevent a negative response from working against the applicant. In this sense, members of the review committees must contextualize and eventually repair the damage that this statement may cause to the applicant. This is seen as an extra effort, but one that is considered justified:

> We do a good job at positioning in the current ASU context. Like these are the design imperatives, these are our values. These people have clearly missed that. They either chose not to read, or they chose not to pay attention to these things, but we're going to fight on behalf of this person because this person is doing work that aligns with the university. (I3)

External letters are an instance in which ASU measures itself against more traditional institutions of equal or greater prestige. The university is interested in ensuring that its academics are not completely out of step with the requirements of other leading research universities. This is consistent with interviewees' comments about Crow's concern in the early years about increasing the rigor of tenure review and ensuring that it was not a 'rubber stamp'.

At the same time, academics are allowed to be 'a little different', in line with the charter

and design imperatives. However, the degree of 'difference' that is desirable is not necessarily agreed upon within the institution. In the eyes of some, being too different might not be so positive either, as it would lock the person into ASU. They argue that the prospect of a professor later moving to a more prestigious institution may enhance the prestige of ASU. This perspective is however challenged by other members of the leadership:

> They don't want faculty members to develop such a unique profile that they could never be any place else. I find that less compelling. Maybe it still has to do with some residual feelings about comparability to other universities. That in some way it benefits the university as a whole and its reputation if somebody leaves here and goes to Yale. (I16)

In any case, ASU has made comparisons with other institutions a hallmark of its institutional identity (Pedrosa 2022)[2]. As mentioned before, ASU has claimed the #1 spot in innovation in the U.S. News and World Report ranking for nine consecutive years and has been ranked #1 in global impact by Times Higher Education (ASU 2023b). The campus and the webpage are littered with advertisements showing how it outperforms more prestigious institutions such as MIT, Stanford, and UC Berkeley (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2. Online promotional material example for the university
Source: https://collegeofglobalfutures.asu.edu/impact-scholars/

[2] One piece of evidence of this is the thoroughness of the university's policy on communicating rankings: https://brandguide.asu.edu/brand-elements/logos/rankings

Figure 3. Streetcar traversing the ASU campus, featuring a university advertisement
Source: https://www.asufoundation.org/on/demandware.static/-/Sites-storefront-catalog-m-en/default/dw08523ecb/images/hi-res/Default/ASU-innovation-funding-success-community-40.jpg

One former school director who has been involved in the process of institutional transformation points out that there is a tension that is difficult to resolve between units that are guided by traditional rankings and other schools that have sought to capitalize on ASU's alternative profile.

> One of the places where we've not made as much progress as we'd need to is in the transformation of evaluation and the way that academic units incorporate the design aspirations into how they understand they should be evaluating faculty. It's hard to figure out ways of doing it, particularly when some of the largest units in the university are deeply entrenched in competitive external rankings that have nothing to do with the design aspirations in the charter. (I16)
>
> It is somewhat schizophrenic that in order to succeed, we need to, at some level, compete in that head-to-head competition with traditional institutions, but in order to succeed in our own ways, we need to continue to innovate. (I16).

Despite strong top-down governance, there is still a considerable degree of freedom among the different schools. This allows for a greater plurality of perspectives than is reflected in institutional documents and university branding. The ability to accommodate this 'institutional schizophrenia' is in some ways, what has allowed the university to be at the center of current discussions about new university models.

Discussion

At this point, we can return to the questions raised at the beginning of this article about the presence of the institutional agenda in the evaluation practices and the possible tensions between this innovative framework and the culture of the disciplines. Regarding the first point, we found that evaluators, supported by the current bylaws, generally favor a traditional profile

of an academic who publishes in high-impact journals, attracts external funding, is an acceptable teacher, and mentors students. Tasks related to service are more clearly required for promotion than for tenure. In general, however, the person is expected to be collegial and fit well into the department. A profile aligned with the university's identity—interdisciplinary approach, focus on research impact, inclusion—is celebrated when it occurs, but not made a requirement.

Since Crow's arrival, a strategic vision emerged that sought to change ASU's previous organizational identity, which was seen as having little value. Many transformations were undertaken, ranging from a major reorganization of schools, the adoption of a new set of institutional values (the new charter), greater integration of campuses, a major expansion of online education programs, an aggressive policy of seeking external research funding, and the facilitation of connections between colleges and schools through, for example, joint appointments. Tenure and promotion review, however, was not directly part of this strategic plan. Contrary to our expectations. the president's and provost's interventions were oriented toward viewing tenure review as a means of promoting a path of excellence, rather than as a means of promoting an alternative vision for the institution. In this sense, they seemed to expect the university's new profile to emerge from the bottom up. As faculty members start sharing the institutional project's values, they themselves will make the necessary corrections so that those candidates with an alternative profile are not disadvantaged. They would naturally become champions of the institutional project in the tenure and promotion review. The alignment of the process with institutional priorities will ultimately be achieved through a change in the attitudes of the evaluators themselves, rather than through a top-down modification of the process. In this regard, evaluation was not applied as a direct strategy of inducement, as articulated by Gläser (2019), to steer scholars' behavior.

Regarding the second research question, we observed a tension between the interests of disciplinary communities and those of the institutional project. External reviewers are at the center of this issue because they are not bound by the institution and can be candid. If disagreements occur, internal committee members must introduce 'corrections' and situate the discussion in the institutional context. The presence of external reviewers, however, is not negotiable; it is essential to ASU's positioning, as it allows the institution to measure itself against other universities it wishes to resemble.

However, there is a paradox at play here, which might explain why one school director described the situation as 'schizophrenic'. ASU cannot entirely emulate the top research universities because it aspires to be distinct and embody the essence of the first *New American University*. Consequently, there are no institutions entirely comparable to ASU. External reviewers may then not necessarily assist in legitimizing this alternative profile. For this purpose, the university prefers to rely on reputation-based rankings and other external sources. Yet, simultaneously, the idea of being respected as a top research university and playing the traditional prestige game is a key aspect of ASU's model. For this latter objective, the endorsement of external reviewers from esteemed universities becomes crucial. Hence, the university must strike a delicate balance between maintaining enough tradition to garner respect from peer institutions and fostering enough innovation to be genuinely groundbreaking[3].

[3] Recently, Borlaug and Jungblut (2025) argued that external funding and rankings can be understood as mechanisms that limit the strategic ability of universities to influence research. Based on our case study, we could argue that external reviewers in the tenure process may serve a similar function.

The prevailing traditional model of tenure review cannot then be perceived as an 'iron cage' that hinders institutional transformation and contributes to the global standardization of indicators and criteria. Within the framework of this American university, the process appears to possess sufficient flexibility to adapt to and even support the process of change. At different stages, the voices of departmental colleagues, directors and deans, and senior management are heard. In turn, a university-wide committee reviews the entire dossier and ensures the fairness of the process. The voices of disciplinary peers are also present through external reviewers. Metrics and quantitative data are typically contextualized and interpreted within reports by academics, rather than being taken at face value. The organization of tenure review in North American universities generates a system of checks and balances in which there are multiple instances of deliberation and review. It does not in itself seem to be a barrier to more responsible forms of evaluation. In this sense, our findings add nuance to CoARA's 'theory of change', which focuses on institutional mechanisms of evaluation as the main driver of transformation. Our case study, on the other hand, foregrounds the weight that shared beliefs within disciplinary communities also have in shaping evaluation processes.

It is important, however, to remember that, apart from the tenure process, there are other sources of 'irresponsible' assessment practices in the US. Rankings operating at the level of institutions, departments, and even degrees such as MBAs are a pervasive example. Understanding the interplay between rankings, beliefs of disciplinary communities, and tenure review systems is necessary to contextualize discussions of assessment reform more effectively.

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