

[Back to Volume Ten Contents](#)

## The Weaponization of Student Evaluations of Teaching: Bullying and the Undermining of Academic Freedom

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### Abstract

Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) can be weaponized to justify undermining academic freedom and subjecting untenured and contingent faculty to surveillance and bullying. I use an autobiographical case study of my experience of the tenure process at a small liberal arts college to illustrate how SETs can enable these processes. SETs have the power they do, in part, because of an increasingly precarious academic job market and because SETs can be deployed to make forms of bullying appear to be based on data. Moreover, SETs are a particularly adaptable weapon because the data can be interpreted to justify a range of positions. As such, SETs can be wielded to exacerbate the asymmetrical character of the relations of power that untenured and contingent faculty experience and to counter diversification, interdisciplinarity, and other important transformations taking place in higher education.

Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) can be utilized as an institutionally legitimized weapon to bully untenured and contingent faculty and compel conformity to the whims of tenured colleagues. They can also be used to stifle efforts to diversify higher education, foster interdisciplinarity, and undo long-standing hierarchies. Furthermore, in academia, pressures to conform often look like a discourse of “cooperation,” “civility,” and invoking “our” department culture and the way “we” do things. SETs facilitate the translation of such pressures into ostensibly neutral, data-based demands.

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The meaning ascribed to SET data is created through the particular analysis of those data. Even exceptionally high SET scores and positive student commentary can be used as the basis for numerical claims that an untenured faculty member's teaching is inadequate and to coerce her or him into conforming to the expectations of tenured faculty. It is a way that, as K. A. Amienne (2017) describes academic bullying, "abusers weaponize their own idiosyncrasies and parade them as high standards, shaming anyone who falls short." To illustrate how this dynamic works I draw on my tenure experience at a small liberal arts college and show how particular interpretations of SET scores can serve as means of control and surveillance.

Understanding the power SETs have requires examining the changing labor conditions that recent PhDs experience in the United States. The first important change, which has coincided with the increased reliance on SETs for hiring and tenure decisions, is that the competitiveness of the academic job market has intensified and the percentage of adjunct positions has risen. According to the AAUP (n.d.), the percentage of tenured and tenure-track faculty fell from 57 percent in 1975 to 29 percent in 2011. Data reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2015) from the US Department of Education show that almost half of non-tenure-track faculty have contracts that are for one year or less. The need for high SETs and glowing letters of recommendation so as to have the strongest possible job application in an abysmal job market makes contingent faculty all the more exploitable and subject to the demands of tenured faculty and administration.

The second change to the conditions that many recent PhDs experience is a crushing amount of student loan debt, in some cases in excess of \$250,000 (June 2014), alongside adjunct positions that pay increasingly exploitative wages. A story in the *Atlantic* reports that 31 percent of part-time faculty live at or below the poverty line (Fredrickson 2015). In 2014 the median pay per class for adjuncts was just \$2,700, and some adjunct faculty reportedly need to be supported by public assistance (Patton 2012), pursue sex work, and live in their cars to make ends meet (Gee 2017). Because of student loan debt, many tenure-track faculty live paycheck to paycheck. In this context of low-paying adjunct positions and the proliferation of debt, the pressures to conform to the demands of particularly outspoken senior colleagues are all the more powerful.

I here bring the emergent literature on academic bullying into conversation with the critical literature on SETs. One study found that "close to two-thirds of higher education employees, regardless of race, gender, or age, are affected by workplace bullying" (Hollis 2018, 7). Though academic bullying can and sometimes does involve physical violence,<sup>1</sup> it often takes less extreme forms where higher-status faculty compel lower-

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on academic bullying includes explorations of the health impacts (Cassell 2011), experiences of trauma (Fogg 2008), suicide (Gravois 2006), and the role of social environments in producing bullying (Metzger, Petit, and Sieber 2015), particularly in instances of academic mobbing, where groups from across the institutional hierarchy bully a particular target (Hollis 2012; Westhues 2004).

status colleagues to take on extra service burdens, teach in less desirable time slots, accept subjection to excessive scrutiny, and conform to their expectations.

While research exists on how students use SETs to sexually harass professors (DeSouza 2011; Lindahl and Unger 2010), the critical SET literature largely focuses on issues of validity and reliability (Uttl, White, and Wong Gonzalez 2016; Carrell and West 2009), grade inflation (Clayson 2009), the consumerization of higher education (Stroebe 2016), and how SETs produce structural inequalities and disadvantage faculty from historically underrepresented demographic groups (Lazos 2012; MacNell, Driscoll, and Hunt 2014). I build upon these insights to explore how SETs enable forms of interpersonal violence that appear neutral because they are based on numbers and data. Moreover, the same racial epistemologies, gendered expectations, and other biases that inform student responses on SETs also inform how individual faculty and administrators interpret SETs and actively translate them into cases for or against contract renewal and tenure (Rodriguez, Glenn-Levin Rodriguez, and Freeman 2019).

I turn now to an autobiographical case study to demonstrate how SETs can be weaponized to enable forms of bullying under the guise of mentorship. Though a case study cannot offer generalizable statistical conclusions about the numerical data that SETs produce, case studies can help us understand how cultural conceptions, biases, and norms inform the translations and interpretations that give SETs life as “evidence” for hiring, contract renewal, and tenure decisions.

## The Case Study

Whether I was qualified to earn tenure was not at issue when I went through the tenure review process. The eighteen-page department report was a glowing recommendation. The conclusion read, “Professor Rodriguez is an excellent teacher, and clearly meets the teaching criteria for tenure . . . [his] scholarship has been excellent and abundantly significant, thus exceeding the standards and criteria for tenure and promotion. . . . In short, the departmental review committee unanimously recommends Professor Rodriguez for tenure and promotion to Associate Professor.”

The reports from the faculty committee on tenure and promotion and the president were similarly complimentary. I thus write this article not because I was denied tenure or had a borderline case but because the strength of my tenure file positions me well to speak out against a process of bullying. Moreover, while Kenneth Westhues (2005) finds in his extensive research that it is often those who excel who are targets of bullying in higher education, not everyone who was bullied in my department excelled. In this specific

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situation, a deeply hierarchical department culture gave rise to experiences of bullying and relentless pressure aimed at untenured faculty. This bullying was legitimized through SET data.

Tenured members of my department had mixed expectations for how SETs would inform department tenure deliberations. The summer prior to the academic year when two of my colleagues and I were hired, my department colleagues constructed a new “Standards and Criteria” (SAC) document, which the college requires all departments to use to guide contract-renewal and tenure decisions. Department SAC documents are intended as an interpretation of how the faculty bylaws apply to a particular discipline. The faculty bylaws stipulate that by the time of the tenure review candidates must exhibit “teaching excellence” across thirteen categories that include inspiring students to achieve, effective advising, and encouraging critical thinking.

The faculty bylaws say very little about the place of SETs in the review process. They note only that the tenure committee is expected to summarize the SETs from each course with numerical or written summaries, and to explain the methods the committee used to prepare the summary. The faculty bylaws do not provide instructions as to how to assess or interpret the SETs. The bylaws do stipulate that a committee of three students will read and comment on the tenure candidate’s SETs and on data produced through a separate survey that is sent to all students the professor has taught. Likewise, my department SAC document says only that the SET data must be summarized, analyzed, and interpreted with reference to the qualitative and quantitative data and in relation to the department curriculum.

The SETs at my home institution have three qualitative questions where students can write commentary and twenty-nine Likert Scale questions about such things as the numbers of hours students worked per week and the grade they expect. For example, the last two questions, which faculty refer to as the “global assessments,” read,

28. How would you rate the overall quality of this course?

29. How would you rate the overall quality of his/her teaching in this course?

Student options range from “1” for “poor” to “5” for “excellent.”

The faculty bylaws do not stipulate a numerical expectation for SETs, nor do they stipulate that SETs are an indication of “teaching excellence.” However, a campus norm circulates that untenured and contingent faculty are expected to receive an average of “4” or higher on their SET scores.

I was hired in 2011 with two other tenure-track professors. At the time I was hired there were eight tenured and one tenure-track professor in the department; then the department hired two more tenure-track faculty in the two subsequent years. Professor Hayes<sup>2</sup> was the only department chair I experienced for five of the first six semesters of my appointment. Professor Hayes was responsible for meeting with each untenured

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<sup>2</sup> This is a pseudonym. I will refer to this person and others with gender-neutral pronouns.

member of the department to discuss his or her SETs at the end of each semester and provide mentorship. Professor Hayes implemented a new practice of writing a letter of assessment wherein the SETs were translated into an evaluation of whether or not a candidate had attained “teaching excellence,” which, as noted above, is the bylaw criteria for tenure. The untenured members of the department did not initially understand the ramifications of this language, nor did they realize that this translation was not department policy, despite Professor Hayes presenting it as such.

In the fall of 2011 Professor Hayes told the untenured members of the department that the criteria for “teaching excellence” was that all SET averages should be 4 or higher, though this is not departmental or campus policy, and we were not notified that “teaching excellence” was the criterion for tenure. However, if an untenured faculty received SET averages higher than 4, then, according to Professor Hayes, the benchmark to attain “teaching excellence” was moved up to averages of 4.5. Professor Hayes also told the untenured faculty that we needed to show continual improvement on each measure to earn tenure. We were also told that students’ “expected grade,” as reported on the SETs, needed to occur in a bell curve distribution with an average grade of C or less.

The fixation on ever-increasing numbers fostered fear among the untenured faculty of pursuing any action that might make students unhappy and retaliate on our SETs. Though I didn’t understand it in the fall of 2011, presenting this view of Professor Hayes’s SET expectations as simply a matter of department policy was a method of transforming SETs into a weapon to compel conformity to Professor Hayes’s particular conceptions of “teaching excellence,” “standards,” and “rigor,” and their opposition to interdisciplinarity and diversification, which I discuss below.

At the end of each semester Professor Hayes presented the untenured members of the department with a letter that made assertions about what the SET data indicated about our teaching quality. In each case these letters stressed that our teaching lacked “excellence” in some way. These meetings and the letters that followed became sources of great anxiety for the untenured members of the department. The letters had three sections that included bylaw language, assertions about “areas of strength,” and assertions about “areas for improvement.” Here is a set of excerpts from the last letter I received:

Summary of Jan. 18, 2014 discussion with Jason re: Fall 2013 course evaluations

B) *Areas of strength* . . . The evaluations show that Jason is demonstrating excellence in nearly all aspects of his teaching: mean scores were above 4.0 on all 24 indicators in both Anth. 110 and Anth. 319/419, above 4.5 on 19 of 24 indicators for Anth. 110, and above 4.5 on 21 of 24 indicators for Anth. 319/419. Qualitative comments in both courses suggest that students

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see Jason as an engaging, helpful, and challenging instructor, from whom they learn a great deal. . . . This is an admirable record of achievement. . . .

C) *Areas for improvement* There is one area of ongoing concern related to rigor: grade distribution. Students' expected grades remain strongly tilted towards the A range in Anth. 110, where 21 of 35 students reported expecting an A and only one student expected a grade lower than a B. We discussed the meaning of grades and whether and how grades fit with Jason's overall pedagogical goals. Finally, as in previous semesters qualitative comments suggest that students would prefer less time spent on student presentations (in Anth. 110) and more time discussing course readings (in both courses). We discussed various options for responding to these comments, including teaching Anth. 319/419 in a two day/week time slot, teaching Anth. 319/419 as part of a learning community, and using the Anth. 110 reading questions to frame student discussion of course readings as well as a check on whether they had done the reading prior to class.

*Note*<sup>3</sup>: The statements contained herein reflect Prof. Hayes's particular interpretation of how to use course evaluations in assessing teaching, and should not be taken as a reflection of departmental policy.

Though two classes were under consideration here, I will focus on Anthropology 319/419, as this course received the most criticism and was the one for which major changes were demanded. Here are the summary SET data for the Anthropology 319/419 course:

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<sup>3</sup> As I discuss below, Professor Hayes added this statement at the bottom of the letter after I spoke with every other member of the department and then demanded that a qualifier be included. Though I demanded that Professor Hayes add a qualifier, the specific language is Professor Hayes's.

<b>Professor:</b>	Jason Rodriguez																				
<b>Course:</b>	ANTH 319-01/419-01 Feminist & Political Anthropology																			<b>Year:</b> Fall 2013	
<b>STUDENTS:</b>	1	2	3	4	5																<b>MEAN</b>
<b>C-W BACKGROUND</b>																					
1. Hours invested	4	4	3	3	3																3.40
2. Sought help	3	3	3	3	3																3.00
3. Missed classes	2	2	1	2	1																1.60
4. Expected grade	2	3	1	2	1																1.80
5. Deserved grade	2	3	1	2	1																1.80
<b>C-W EVALUATION</b>																					
1. Interest in subj	5	4	5	5	5																4.80
2. Understanding	5	4	5	5	5																4.80
3. New skills/persp.	5	4	5	5	5																4.80
4. Knowledge	5	4	5	5	5																4.80
5. High standard	5	4	5	5	5																4.80
6. Clear expectations	4	4	4	5	5																4.40
7. Class enhanced	5	4	5	5	5																4.80
8. Timely feedback	4	4	5	5	5																4.60
9. Constructive fdbk	4	4	4	5	5																4.40
10. Accessible	4	4	4	5	5																4.40
11. Inclusion/respect	5	4	5	5	5																4.80
<b>Class Year</b>	<b>SR</b>	<b>SR</b>	<b>SR</b>	<b>SR</b>	<b>JR</b>																
<b>College</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>WS</b>	<b>WS</b>	<b>WS</b>	<b>WS</b>																
<b>DEPARTMENT</b>																					
1. Classes orgainized	4	5	4	5	5																4.60
2. Classes contrib. learning	5	5	4	5	5																4.80
3. Lectures contrib. learning	5	5	5	5	5																5.00
4. Discussions contrib. learning	5	5	5	5	5																5.00
5. Exams/papers contrib. learning	5	5	4	5	5																4.80
6. Grading fair	5	5	4	5	5																4.80
7. Appropriate Readings	4	5	4	5	5																4.60
8. Critical Thinking	5	5	5	5	5																5.00
9. Encourages Questions	5	5	5	4	5																4.80
10. Interested in Subject	5	5	5	5	5																5.00
11. Helpful	5	5	5	5	5																5.00
12 Course Quality	5	5	5	5	5																5.00
13 Quality of Teaching	5	5	5	5	5																5.00

*Note:* For the prompt “hours invested,” “1” means 0 to 1 hours, “2” means 2 to 3 hours, “3” means 4 to 6 hours, “4” means 7 to 9 hours per week and “5” means 10 or more hours per week. For the prompts “expected grade” and “deserved grade,” 1 indicates an A, 2 indicates a B, and 3 indicates a C. For the prompts “sought help” and “missed classes,” the number indicates how many times each occurred. For all of the prompts under “C-W Evaluation” and “Department,” a “5” is the most positive rating students can give and a “1” is the least positive.

I should note at the outset that although Professor Hayes’s letter sounds in many ways positive, as I explain below, it is in fact an assertion that my teaching was not tenurable. I also want to be clear that I do not think that these SETs indicate anything about the quality of my teaching. Rather, I am interested in how SET scores as high as this could be weaponized to claim that my teaching was untenurable and that my pedagogy required major revisions, as Professor Hayes asserted. Furthermore, in the four semesters that Professor Hayes issued these letters to untenured faculty, none of these letters assessed our teaching to be of tenurable quality.

Some of the more obvious problems evident in Professor Hayes’s letter include how it is taken for granted that these particular SETs are reliable and valid and the uncritical ease with which Professor Hayes translates the numbers “4” and “4.5” into indications of “excellence” or a lack thereof. Additionally, student

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reporting is taken at face value, the SETs are utilized to justify “suggesting” changes in order to earn the label “tenurable,” and there is no comparison to campuswide or department-wide data. This is because no such data exist.

During the meeting to discuss my SETs, Professor Hayes told me that, given my pedagogical philosophy, I was not a good fit for the department and “should consider applying elsewhere” if, among other issues, I wasn’t willing to prioritize “rigor,” which referred to student reporting of their “expected grade.” This was not department policy, and this is not a position based on scholarly literature. Rather, this represented a clear weaponization of SETs to demand conformity. I also couldn’t help but read it as an assertion that Professor Hayes would oppose my tenure case if I refused to conform to their demands. As I discuss below, I interpreted Professor Hayes’s weaponization of SETs as ultimately a matter of battling against ongoing efforts to eradicate rigid academic hierarchies and to decolonize and diversify higher education, which Professor Hayes and other tenured members of my department described as potential threats to “standards.”

I was also told at this meeting that although I could not improve many of the SET scores for my Anthropology 319/419 course, given that the averages for many of the twenty-nine Likert Scale questions were 5s, I needed to maintain these scores to have my teaching assessed as “excellent” for tenure. What this meant was that a single student in a future class had the power to convey that my teaching was not tenurable if they gave me a 4 on any of the indicators for which I previously received all 5s.

Professor Hayes asserted at this meeting that the student comments indicated that my teaching lacked “excellence” because one of the students said, “I wish we had more class time to mull over the material.” This same student was also one of the two students who gave me the highest rating (5) on every one of the Likert Scale questions and described the class as, “One of the best courses I’ve ever taken” in their written comments. Based on this one student’s comments, Professor Hayes asserted that I had a “serious time management problem.” This resulted in Professor Hayes’s suggestion that I coteach the course under the guidance of a mentor<sup>4</sup> and teach the course as a twice-a-week course, rather than in seminar meeting once a week for two hours and forty-five minutes. I was also asked to justify what Professor Hayes saw as an inappropriate use of the work of Judith Butler, given that my course was an anthropology course and Judith Butler is “a sociologist.”

Although Judith Butler is a philosopher who teaches in the Department of Rhetoric at UC Berkeley, and it would be atypical for an advanced anthropology seminar titled “Feminist and Political Anthropology” to not include her work, there is a bigger issue here. This issue is that untenured members of my department experienced persistent surveillance, normative teaching expectations, and threats to our careers. This

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<sup>4</sup> This was the suggestion that I teach the course as part of a “learning community.”



manifested as the translation of quantitative and qualitative feedback on SETs into indications of a lack of “teaching excellence” and justifications for micromanaging even the minutia of course readings, grade distribution, and types of assignments.

Additionally, the assessment letter notes that in my Anthropology 110 course, “21 of 35 students reported expecting an A and only one student expected a grade lower than a B. We discussed the meaning of grades and whether and how grades fit with Jason’s overall pedagogical goals.” What the letter doesn’t note is that we had an argument about what students “expect” versus the grade they actually earn. This argument ended when I was told that I needed to spend class time explaining to students how they should fill out the SET form so that fewer students reported expecting an A so that I could demonstrate “excellence” in “rigor.”

Despite receiving many numbers that it would be impossible to improve upon and effusive written praise, these SETs were weaponized to make me feel that my tenure case was in jeopardy and to justify telling me that I needed to “consider applying elsewhere.” After receiving Professor Hayes’s assessment letter, but prior to signing it, I spoke with each member of my department about this use and interpretation of the SETs and the presentation of Professor Hayes’s particular approach as department policy. By this time I had realized that by requiring the untenured members of the department to sign a document that indicated that our teaching lacked “excellence,” Professor Hayes was requiring that we consent to an assertion that our teaching was not tenurable, since “excellence” is the standard for tenure in the faculty bylaws. When confronted with this directly, Professor Hayes acknowledged that this was so.

None of the other thirteen members of my department shared Professor Hayes’s particular approach to SETs, nor did they interpret my SETs for that semester to indicate any problems with my teaching. I also learned during these conversations that Professor Hayes had implemented this letter-writing practice the year that I was hired and that my tenured department colleagues weren’t aware of it. Additionally, after reading through my SETs and Professor Hayes’s letter, three of the tenured members of my department told me that they would not have been able to earn tenure if they had been subjected to the SET expectations Professor Hayes expected.

As such, I demanded that Professor Hayes include the qualifying statement at the end of the letter, noted above. Although Professor Hayes continued to be chair for the spring 2014 semester, I did not receive one of these letters again. I learned later that other senior members of the department had requested that Professor Hayes cease this practice. A number of my department colleagues also warned me that Professor Hayes had begun to tell them and other of my colleagues that I was “resistant to mentoring” and “difficult to work with.”

Though the letters ceased, some tenured members of the department continued to deploy SETs to imbue their opinions with a semblance of objectivity. There were heated meetings in the lead-up to the formal tenure reviews during which the untenured faculty presented findings from the critical scholarly literature on SETs, which the most vocal members of the department dismissed. Professor Hayes claimed that a tenured professor with sufficient knowledge could “triangulate” SETs with observations of teaching and an analysis of syllabi to make an objective assessment of whether a candidate had attained “teaching excellence.” When Professor Hayes was asked to produce any evidence for this position from peer-reviewed studies, we were told that we “just need[ed] to trust the process.”

Another tenured member of the department who was particularly outspoken, Professor Richard, took the position that the SET questions about student impressions were biased but that we nonetheless needed our SET numbers to increase across the tenure period. Professor Richard also asserted that numbers that were too high were an indication that the professor was pandering to students. The message, thus, was that “teaching excellence” hinged upon showing consistent increases to SET numbers without going too high. Professor Richard also argued that the SETs included a number of “objective” questions about such things as hours spent in class, expected grade, and timeliness of feedback, and that responses to these questions could be used without reservation. There is no evidence in the scholarly literature for this position either. Of course, this wasn’t ultimately about scholarly analysis. Rather, as I discuss further below, the weaponization of SETs was about disciplining and/or eliminating difference, maintaining academic hierarchy, and managing concerns that diversification leads to diminished “standards.”

To demonstrate the problem with the position that some SET data were “objective,” in every one of the twenty-three classes I taught from fall 2012 until spring 2017, I graded and returned every assignment at the next class meeting. For example, for a class that met on Tuesday and Thursday, if students turned something in on Tuesday, it was graded and back to them with feedback on Thursday. Many students in my classes wrote comments about this in the SETs that included, “We always received our work by the next class!” “He returns the papers the next class period with an entire typed page of feedback,” and “I didn’t know someone could grade 30 essays that quickly.” Yet in a number of SETs across my classes there were students who answered “Neutral,” “Disagree,” or “Strongly Disagree” to the SET prompt “The professor provided feedback on my work in a timely fashion.”

After seeing how SETs could be weaponized and learning of the voluminous scholarly literature on how SETs reproduce biases, one of my department colleagues and I successfully spearheaded an amendment to the faculty bylaws. The amendment noted that the scholarly literature finds that SETs reflect biases and are a flawed method for assessing teaching quality. It also instructed all parties involved in the tenure process to

recognize that the social positionalities of faculty affect how students evaluate them and that using numerical SET benchmarks creates differential hurdles for tenure and thus an unfair process.

Despite the adoption of this bylaw amendment, tenured members of my department continued to pressure the untenured members to show unceasing “improvement” through increases to SET numbers and to manage students’ reporting of their expected grade and the number of hours they estimated they worked per week. Practices of surveillance continued as well. In one instance this manifested as a tenured member of the department asking the students who were taking an untenured colleague’s class about the grades they earned on an exam and then chastising the untenured colleague for not giving what the tenured colleague perceived to be a sufficient number of Cs and Ds. This was justified in the name of “mentoring” the untenured professor to demonstrate “rigor” on his or her SETs.

Though Professor Hayes was the most regimented about using SETs to compel conformity, Professor Hayes was not alone in doing so. The message from some other tenured members of the department was clear: if you want to keep your job, you need to focus on producing SET data that conform to our expectations for a continual rise in numbers and for students to report low “expected grades” and a high volume of hours per week spent on the class, and to change your teaching if we tell you to do so.

## Analysis

Academic bullying, often concealed and normalized in everyday institutional behavior (Denny 2014), can be particularly hard to combat when it is institutional procedures and review processes that are weaponized. AAUP guidelines stipulate that faculty should have freedom from coercion to determine the content of their research agendas and courses. Many of the academic freedom guidelines outlined in faculty contracts with their college or university are adapted from the AAUP 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*. Cary Nelson, former president of the AAUP, outlined a list of twelve clarifications about the meaning of academic freedom in a 2010 article published in *Inside Higher Ed*. I have included the two most relevant here:

2. Academic freedom establishes a faculty member’s right to remain true to his or her pedagogical philosophy and intellectual commitments. It preserves the intellectual integrity of our educational system and thus serves the public good.

11. Academic freedom gives faculty members substantial latitude in deciding how to teach the courses for which they are responsible.

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Tenured faculty can weaponize SETs to undermine academic freedom through coercing and threatening their untenured and contingent colleagues to conform to a narrow set of norms around teaching, scholarship, “standards,” and academic hierarchy that they have decided to police. For example, Professor Hayes was opposed to interdisciplinarity and used their interpretation of the SETs to try to compel me to conform to rigid disciplinary boundaries. There was a moment in our meeting about SETs when Professor Hayes transitioned to telling me what readings I could assign and packaged their opposition to interdisciplinarity and their erroneous assertion about Judith Butler’s academic background into a data-based condemnation of my teaching. I was not the only untenured faculty member who experienced this particular sleight of hand, nor was this the only time I experienced it.

Another example of bullying under the auspices of mentoring, described above, involved Professor Hayes demanding that my students report a particular grade distribution in order for me to earn Professor Hayes’s support for tenure, which was another proclivity that was wrapped in an aura of legitimacy via reference to SET data. My failure to conform to Professor Hayes’s expectations resulted in my being deemed a bad fit and told to apply elsewhere. Moreover, while the assessment letters Professor Hayes presented to untenured department members seem civil, they were thinly veiled threats to our careers.

As noted above, pressures to conform in academia are often wrapped in discourses of “civility.” In my department this took the form of asserting that the untenured faculty didn’t trust their tenured colleagues when we tried to revise the review process and refused to be placated by retorts that took the form of “this is the way we do things” and “you just need to trust the process.” It also involved labeling the untenured faculty who sought to change the review process as “difficult to work with.” These dynamics aren’t new, but SETs change them in important ways. SETs allow tenured faculty to demand conformity by way of appeals to ostensibly objective data. I and coauthors have argued elsewhere that all of this can add up to a set of tactics to keep the faculty body white and male through forcing out people from historically underrepresented groups and through normalizing differences in pedagogical practice (Rodriguez, Glenn-Levin Rodriguez, and Freeman 2019).

As Darla Twale and Barbara De Luca (2008) note, the institutional system, governance structure, and hierarchy of a college or university can operate as a support system for bullies. In some cases bullying looks like “manipulating and intimidating the seemingly powerless,” “unfairly treating, hounding, micromanaging, undermining, and unfairly criticizing,” and “eroding another’s self-confidence and self-esteem” (19). Twale and De Luca note that such forms of bullying often succeed because the tenure process is shrouded in secrecy. This was evident, for example, in my untenured colleagues and I not initially understanding the meaning that “teaching excellence” had for the tenure process at our institution (see also Zemsky, Wegnar,

and Massy 2005). Moreover, Professor Hayes's fixation on our teaching succeeded in compelling the untenured members of the department to spend a disproportionate amount of time on their teaching, rather than on scholarship. Of course, teaching is not the only pursuit that informs whether a faculty member is granted tenure.

## Conclusion

SETs are often used to assess faculty performance and as a proxy for student learning. In the context of escalating amounts of student loan debt and the declining availability of tenure-track positions, SETs can be made into a powerful weapon to undermine academic freedom and to bully and eliminate untenured and contingent faculty who are "different." In the hands of those invested in maintaining the status quo, SETs provide an avenue for tenured faculty to impede the very sorts of changes that the diversification efforts of the last few decades have sought to foster.

Tenured members of my department weaponized SETs to bully their untenured colleagues, but they also did so as a response to changes that are taking place in the academy. I have already discussed Professor Hayes's opposition to interdisciplinarity. On more than one occasion Professors Hayes and Richard made comments during department meetings about supporting "diversity," "so long as we don't lower our standards." This concern about "standards" manifested as concerns about disciplinary norms, grade inflation, and maintaining department traditions, which they described as a matter of maintaining scholarly "rigor." "Our way of doing things" became a method of protecting long-standing forms of academic hierarchy. Furthermore, within the discourses some of my tenured colleagues deployed about "standards," to challenge department traditions was to violate civility and to reject rigor. Said directly, the weaponization of SETs enabled bullying, but it was also about disciplining or eliminating difference, undermining diversification, and protecting academic hierarchy.

The high stakes and competitive character of academia and tenure provide ready rationalizations for bullying (Keashly and Neuman 2010; Nelson and Lambert 2001). These dynamics have been around for a long time in different forms, but SETs allow everyday relations of power to be reframed as "mentoring" untenured faculty to succeed on an "objective" metric of teaching quality and to operate as a cover for institutionally legitimized forms of coercion. Among faculty who leave their institutions, such interpersonal conflicts are among the top reasons they cite for doing so (Ambrose, Huston, and Norman 2005). Of course, SETs haven't been around forever, nor have they always been used as key pieces of evidence in tenure decisions. There is overwhelming evidence in the scholarly literature that they ought not to be used this way. Although SETs are a cheap and easy way to imbue tenure and contract renewal processes with a semblance of

objectivity, we must ask whether this outweighs the downsides, which include that SETs give voice to student and faculty racial and gender biases, compel pandering to students, and enable bullying and the undermining of academic freedom.

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