“Best Practices”: A Giant Step Toward Ensuring Compliance with ABA Standard 405(c), a Small Yet Important Step Toward Addressing Gender Discrimination in the Legal Academy

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In March 2014, the American Bar Association (ABA) voted to leave Accreditation Standard 405 undisturbed. The ABA’s decision required law schools to continue to grant tenure to traditional law faculty, yet permitted them to continue to deny tenure to clinical and legal writing faculty. At the same time, recognizing the need for increased professional skills training, the

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3. SECTION OF LEGAL EDUC. AND ADMISSIONS TO THE BAR, AM. BAR ASS’N, ABA STANDARDS AND RULES OF PROCEDURE FOR APPROVAL OF LAW SCHOOLS, 2015–2016, § 405(c)–(d) at 29 (2015) [hereinafter 2015 STANDARDS AND RULES]. Standard 405(c) reads:

A law school shall afford to full-time clinical faculty members a form of security of position reasonably similar to tenure, and non-compensatory perquisites reasonably similar to those provided other full-time faculty members. A law school may require these faculty members to meet standards and obligations reasonably similar to those required of other full-time faculty members. However, this Standard does not preclude a limited number of fixed, short-term appointments in a clinical program predominantly staffed by full-time faculty members, or in an experimental program of limited duration.

Standard 405(d) requires law schools to “afford legal writing teachers such security of position and other rights and privileges of faculty membership as may be necessary to (1) attract and retain a faculty that is well qualified to provide legal writing instruction . . . and (2) safeguard academic freedom.” Id.
ABA voted to increase the number of experiential credits law students must complete from one to six.\(^4\) As explained to the ABA Council in advance, these two decisions work together to increase the demands on skills faculty, who are predominantly female, yet keep them at a lower professional status with less security of position.\(^5\) And it is not clear that law schools are hiring additional, full-time skills faculty to meet these demands.

During the six years of review and debate that led to the 2014 vote, the Society of American Law Teachers (SALT)\(^6\) and the Association of Legal Writing Directors (ALWD)\(^7\) urged the ABA Council to continue to require tenure to ensure academic freedom.\(^8\) Along with the Clinical Legal Education Association (CLEA),\(^9\) they further urged the Council to adopt a standard that would not discriminate against full-time faculty on the basis of subject matter.\(^10\)

4. Id. Standard 303(a)(3) at 16. Experiential courses include simulation courses, law clinics, and field placements. Id.

5. See, e.g., Letter from Kathleen Elliott Vinson, President, Am. Ass’n of Legal Writing Dirs., et al., to Solomon Oliver, Jr., Council Chairperson, Section of Legal Educ. and Admissions to the Bar, Am. Bar Ass’n, on Proposed Standards 205, 206, 303, and 405, at 1 (Jan. 29, 2014) http://www.alwd.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/ALWDABA-Letter12914.pdf [https://perma.cc/36HN-YYZ4] (“highlighting the disparate impact the proposals would have on women and minority faculty in the academy”) [hereinafter ALWD Letter on Proposed Changes]; Memorandum from Richard K. Neumann, Jr., Professor, Hofstra Univ. Maurice A. Dean Sch. of Law, & J. Lyn Entrikin, Professor, Univ. of Ark. at Little Rock, William H. Bowen Sch. of Law, to Council of the Am. Bar Ass’n. Section of Legal Educ. and Admissions to the Bar, on Standard 405 (Notice and Comment) 15 (Jan. 30, 2014) http://www.alwd.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Standard-405-Neumann-Entrikin.pdf [https://perma.cc/5P77-FJGL] (noting the “enhanced and expanded skills teaching required by the proposed revisions to Chapter 3 would be done by the very law teachers against whom ABA-accredited law schools are currently permitted to discriminate: clinicians and legal writing professors”).

6. For information about SALT, see https://www.saltlaw.org/.

7. For information about ALWD, see http://www.alwd.org/.

8. See, e.g., ALWD Letter on Proposed Changes, supra note 5, at 4 (“strongly opposing any alternative to Standard 405 that would eliminate tenure as an accreditation requirement”); Soc’y of Am. Law Teachers, April 24, 2013 SALT Statement on Standards 405 & 315, at 1 http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/migrated/2011_build/legal_education/committees/standards_review_documents/20130425_comment_multiple_topics_salt.authcheckdam.pdf [https://perma.cc/P9D9-GLXT] (acknowledging that “only a tenure system can adequately protect faculty rights to academic freedom and full participation in governance”) [hereinafter SALT Statement on Standards]. All comments on the ABA’s proposed changes to Standard 405 are available at Comments, Am. B. Ass’n, http://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/committees/standards_review/comp_review_archive/comments.html (last visited Nov. 21, 2016).

9. For information about CLEA, see http://www.cleaweb.org/.

The only proposal the Standards Review Committee made that came close to the joint recommendations was Alternative C. Although it did not require tenure, Alternative C proposed that law schools accord all full-time faculty members the same rights as other full-time faculty "irrespective of a full-time faculty member's academic field or teaching methodology." The Council rejected Alternative C and chose not to publish it for notice and comment.10

Regrettably, the long and tortuous history of Standard 405 suggests that the vision of equal opportunity for all law faculty—traditional, clinical, legal writing, academic support, and teaching librarians—is not going to be realized anytime soon.13 The highest and best security of position most professional skills faculty can likely hope for in the near future is that embodied in current Standard 405(c).14 Thus, law schools' adherence to established best practices is necessary if "reasonably similar to tenure" is to mean something for those who struggle to and ultimately achieve 405(c) status.

Within a year of the ABA's decision, several legal writing faculty members with 405(c) status had already experienced or were beginning to experience significant problems with their contract renewals. Whether because of a downturn in student applications or other financial strain, law schools had begun (once again) to violate the letter and spirit of 405(c).15 As these events unfolded, some legal writing faculty began to report them to individual members of the Board of Directors of the Legal Writing Institute (LWI), the second-largest organization of law professors in the United States, with nearly 3,000 members in thirty-eight countries. In response, LWI formed a Professional Status Committee to act as a resource for employment or


12. See Memorandum from Solomon Oliver, Jr., Council Chairperson, Section of Legal Educ. and Admissions to the Bar, Am. Bar Ass'n, to Interested Persons and Entities, Comprehensive Review of the ABA Standards for Approval of Law School Matters for Notice and Comment 57 (Sept. 6, 2013), http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_education_and_admissions_to_the_bar/council_reports_and_resolutions/20130906_notice_comment_chs_1_3_4_s203b_s603d.authcheckdam.pdf [https://perma.cc/6JU-7GGS].


14. Although some law schools accord professional skills faculty a security of position in excess of that required by Standard 405, most do not. See infra notes 32 and 33.

15. See infra page 570 and accompanying notes 24-26.
professional development issues and gather information about status issues and challenges facing its membership.16

Having spoken directly with these faculty, LWI is now aware of at least several cases across the country in which legal writing faculty with long-term, presumptively renewable contracts have been terminated without notice, explanation, or an opportunity to be heard.17 Their positions have not been filled, and often the legal writing faculty who remain are required to teach more students without additional compensation. In other cases, schools have threatened to replace full-time legal writing faculty with adjuncts or to restrict or eliminate their current voting rights. Quite recently, one school demanded that its clinical and legal writing faculty sign new contracts requiring—for the first time—two reviews within a five-year period and making contract renewal contingent on a positive formal evaluation. The faculty were told that if they failed to sign these contracts, they would stop receiving their paychecks.

As Weresh points out in Best Practices, this is not the first time law schools have played fast and loose with Standard 405(c). In 2004, CLEA reported that many law schools were “reducing the plain meaning of the words ‘reasonably similar’ in Standard 405 to something quite unlike the treatment of other faculty.”18 In some cases, clinical faculty were being terminated without any showing of good cause,19 and in other cases, law schools were exploiting the fact that 405(c) permits “a limited number of fixed, short-term appointments.”20 Law schools were “continuing faculty on one-year contracts for as many as fifteen to twenty years and claiming that the clinical faculty fit the exception of being ‘fixed, short-term appointments.’ ”21

Then the ABA construed 405(c) to permit at-will contracts for clinical faculty “as long as the law school has some process in place to protect academic freedom.”22 Interpretation 405-6 states that “reasonably similar to tenure”16. See LWI Professional Status Committee, LEGAL WRITING INST., http://lwionline.org/LWI_Professional_Status_Committee.html [https://perma.cc/H7EJ-NC46] (last visited Nov. 21, 2016).
17. Faculty who report these problems to LWI insist on remaining anonymous to protect themselves or their colleagues. The author is co-chair of the Professional Status Committee and has direct knowledge of these cases.
19. See id.
20. 2015 STANDARDS AND RULES, supra note 3, at 29.
21. CLEA, Proposed Changes to Chapter 4, supra note 18, at 4.
includes renewable long-term contracts, and “long-term contract’ means at least a five-year contract that is presumptively renewable or other arrangement sufficient to ensure academic freedom” (emphasis added). In 2004, the Accreditation Committee had cited Northwestern University School of Law for giving one-year employment contracts to most of its clinical faculty and denying them governance rights, in violation of 405(c). Two years later, the Accreditation Committee reversed itself, interpreting “other arrangement sufficient to ensure academic freedom” to allow a separate avenue for complying with 405(c). As CLEA pointed out to the ABA at the time, the Accreditation Committee had essentially equated short-term contracts with long-term contracts.

The most disturbing aspect of the continued discrimination against skills faculty and the abuse of Standard 405(c) is its disparate impact on women. Women represent roughly forty-three percent of all full-time law faculty, yet, according to 2013 statistics available from the ABA, only thirty-six percent of tenured or tenure-track faculty are female.

Data on law faculty by status and gender have become increasingly difficult to obtain. These figures are almost three years old. At present, the only data of this nature published on the websites of the ABA and the Association of American Law Schools (AALS) are these 2013 data. The figures are almost three years old. At present, the only data of this nature published on the websites of the ABA and the Association of American Law Schools (AALS) are these 2013 data. See id.; Data Resources, Ass’n or Am. L. Schs., http://www.aals.org/data-resources/ (providing a link to the ABA data on ABA’s website).
In stark contrast, sixty-three percent of 405(c) faculty are women (an increase from fifty-six percent in 2008). Because this number may not include legal writing faculty with 405(c) status, the overall percentage of women with 405(c) status may be even higher. This means that, to the extent law schools fail to comply with Standard 405(c), they are nearly twice as likely to disadvantage a woman as a man.

Even more shocking is that seventy-one percent (and holding steady since 2001) of legal writing faculty are women, which usually means they have the least security of position under ABA Standard 405(d). To the extent law schools fail to renew legal writing contracts in a manner inconsistent with 405(d), they are almost 2½ times as likely to disadvantage a woman.

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31. See 2015 Standards and Rules, supra note 3, at 29.
I have long advocated for tenure eligibility for all law faculty regardless of subject matter. That said, ensuring fair compliance with Standard 405(c) is at least a beginning to the work that needs to be done to improve the status of a predominantly female professional skills faculty. Ostensibly, 405(c) protects clinical faculty, but law schools often fail to comply with it, and, as Professor Kathryn Stanchi points out, it acts in practice to cabin faculty and discourage academic freedom. Despite the aspirations of Standard 405(c), only sixty-one percent of clinical faculty even have 405(c) status or better.32 The remaining thirty-nine percent are on short-term contracts.33 As for legal writing faculty, perhaps as many as forty-one percent of law schools have some legal writing faculty with 405(c) status or on that track,34 but as one would expect, the vast majority of schools—seventy-eight percent—employ some or all of their legal writing faculty on short-term contracts.35

As faculty status decreases, the percentage of women faculty increases.36 Although salary data are also difficult to obtain, there is evidence that women earn significantly less than their male counterparts regardless of faculty status. In 2014, female tenured or tenure-track faculty likely earned, on average, seventy-seven to eighty cents on the dollar compared with tenured and tenure-track men. Legal writing faculty with 405(c) or short-term contracts likely earn fifty-five cents or less on the dollar.37

32. CSALE 2013–14 Survey, supra note 29, at 39–40 (indicating that 31.4% of clinical faculty have some form of tenure and 29.5% have presumptively renewable contracts).

33. Id.

34. 2014 ALWD/LWI Survey, supra note 30, Question 65 at 64.

35. Id. at x (indicating that 138 out of 178 responding schools reported having legal writing faculty on short-term contracts). Only seven percent report having tenured or tenure-track faculty hired specifically to teach legal writing. Id., Question 10 at 5.

36. See ABA 2013 Data, supra note 28.

37. Author used information from the following sources to calculate this figure. Calculations on file with the author. Andrew Chamberlin, Demystifying the Gender Pay Gap 2 (Mar.
As a result of Standard 405 (and the ABA’s interpretation of its language), the bulk of professional skills faculty—clinical and legal writing—will continue to be on short-term contracts. Even though clinical faculty are entitled to 405(c) status, only sixty-one percent have it. Clinical and legal writing faculty who do have 405(c) status have no guarantee that law schools will afford them a security of position “reasonably similar to tenure.” Women are overrepresented in this group of faculty, and notable efforts to enforce compliance with 405(c) have failed.

Best Practices takes a giant step toward improving this situation by establishing what “reasonably similar to tenure” ought to mean for purposes of 405(c) and will take a smaller, yet important step toward addressing gender discrimination in the legal academy. Consistent with American Association of University Professors regulations, no faculty member with a presumptively renewable long-term contract could be terminated without the law school showing just cause, a legitimate financial exigency, or a bona fide programmatic discontinuance. As Weresh acknowledges, 405(c) status need not be identical to tenure (although it could be). Nor do I read Best Practices to require that. It goes only so far as to require that faculty who “meet standards and obligations
reasonably similar to those required of other full-time faculty members” 39 enjoy the same substantive and procedural protections.

Make no mistake; affording these protections will not transform 405(c) status into tenure (with all the rank, privileges, and rights that flow therefrom) or improve job security for our colleagues on short-term contracts. It will take open hearts and minds to do that.

39. 2015 Standards and Rules, supra note 3, at 29.