



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Amy Bishop and the tenure process

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As an academic and an expert on multiple murder, I've been asked frequently about my opinion on the Amy Bishop case. As the case moves through the Alabama courts, I will have much to say about the motivation for murder and state of mind. In the meantime, the tragedy has given us in higher education an opportunity to reflect on the tenure system and how the process might be improved.

There are, of course, only a few cases like the massacre in Huntsville, and some wise observers are understandable hesitant to overreact to an anomaly. However, there are many instances of less extreme responses to tenure denial—suicide, depression, nonfatal conflicts—that may indeed be preventable. Just as Columbine encouraged us to take a serious look at the problem of bullying, the Bishop case should serve as impetus to reexamine the antiquated tenure process of modern-day academe.

As part of the *Globe's* coverage of the Bishop case, staffer [Tracy Jan](#) wrote an excellent overview of tenure-related issues. And since, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* is not on the reading list of most people who wish to understand the circumstances surrounding the incident, I refer you to my [commentary](#) offered up in the immediate aftermath of the shooting.

It is a dirty, not-so-secret truth that tenure review often involves personalities and politics neatly disguised as dispassionate assessment of scholarship—a process shrouded in secrecy and protected by confidentiality. On occasion, faculty reviewers, whose own tenure may have been awarded decades earlier under standards far less stringent, are positioned to make weighty judgments about colleagues, sometimes with limited appreciation for the potentially devastating ramifications. The tenure system may not be broken, but it certainly is in need of improvement.