

Navigating promotion and tenure: strategies for the newly-employed

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In her address at ASLO's 1999 Sante Fe meeting, Alice Alldredge reflected, with some concern, on the amount of time she found herself either being reviewed or conducting a review of another. Yet, this is our academic culture: we rely on a system where success is based on external review of our performance. In primarily North American colleges and universities, the most important professional review is that conducted for the award of tenure (that is, the life-time commitment by the institution for employment and the guarantee of academic freedom). Yet promotional reviews rivaling the magnitude of tenure exist in a multitude of career tracks. Without question, professional reviews are dubious to the newly-employed.

As Sue Weiler illustrates in her preceding article in this issue, students are not adequately prepared to handle major professional reviews within graduate programs. I attempt to provide a 'survival guide' of sorts with advice on what the newly-employed should bring with them on their trek towards promotion review. With the emphasis on early preparation and strategic planning, hopefully some of the mystique (and perhaps fear) will be removed. What results are my suggestions summarized into a 'top ten' only for Letterman-like artistic value. My caveats: (1) These tips will not, by themselves, get you promoted. (2) Even perfect adherence to them will never substitute for shoddy work and poor scholarly conduct. (3) No two departments (much less institutions) treat promotion and tenure identically, and the height of the 'bar' is set by your peers in your department.

1) Seek mentoring. Find individuals who recently survived the promotion or tenure process. Not only will they help explain the expectations and rules, but they will be an invaluable source of emotional support as decision time approaches. Many larger universities have a formalized mentoring program, but at smaller institutions and remote labs you may need to seek your own mentor.

2) Save everything. At some level, applying for promotion or tenure means you are proving your worth to the institution. Whether or not university guidelines dictate it, you should be prepared to document everything reported in the portfolio. At the earliest point possible (now!), establish a good system for maintaining records of your accomplishments such as invitations for seminars and workshops, talks to civic groups, proposal panels, etc. Filing cabinets work well, as do stackable trays, binders and cardboard boxes. Also, maintain a daily planner as a record of the minutia of your activities.

3) Get regular performance reviews. As difficult as it is to receive criticism about your performance, it is best to hear about deficiencies sooner rather than later. Many programs mandate a mid-track review (sometimes this is a condition for probationary renewal), but an annual review is best as it forces almost continual adjustments in the balance your activities.

4) Familiarize yourself with the formal process. Every institution deals with promotion and tenure differently (this also includes the appeal process should it come to that). Study your employee handbook thoroughly. Know the time-line for review and, most importantly, know your employee rights.

5) Know the 'unspoken' rules and expectations. Faculty and employee handbooks are only guides to the process and reveal little about real (and usually unwritten) expectations for successful promotion. In fact, expectations typically vary between colleges and departments within a university. Pay close attention to senior faculty when they offer advice about numbers of publications, best journals for publication, on which service committees to participate, etc. (see #1 and #3).

6) Develop personal relationships. There are three explicit 'pillars' on which we are perched as research university faculty: Research, Teaching and Service. However, there is a fourth (and hidden) leg: Collegiality. Unless you are truly extraordinary (i.e., National Academy of Sciences inductee), collegiality with your peers will be an equally important consideration for attaining promotion or tenure. Develop strong, positive relationships within your department and university. Chat with the Department Chair at the coffee machine and drop e-mails to the Dean. Let them know about your professional accomplishments. Also, work on relationships outside the university as you will need strong external letters of support later.

7) Choose your battles carefully. Take care how politically dicey issues are handled within the institution. Seek advice from your personal mentor when it comes to assignments such as committee work. My personal advice is that the Seminar Committee is the perfect committee for junior faculty to chair (you get to invite all of your friends to visit you in your new lab), however stay away from the 'Space Committee' and all other committees dealing with money or time.

8) Balance your portfolio. Remain familiar with the contract under which you were originally hired. You agreed to perform your job under some allocation of time devoted to Teaching, Research and Service. As you prepare your review portfolio, ensure that it reflects the original balance of this effort allocation. Seek portfolio examples from others who have been successful in the recent past. Most importantly, if you adhere to #1 - #5, then your portfolio should develop an inherent balance with little additional effort.

9) Stay positive. Know this: promotion or tenure is yours only to lose. When you were hired, your institution went to extraordinary measures and resources to bring you onboard, therefore (de facto) they want you to succeed. After all, it was a huge investment on their part to provide you with years of employment, and now they only need to be convinced that you are worthy of longer-term commitment (and in the case of tenure...for life!). The rule to live by is: You enter with tenure in your grasp, therefore if you have done everything according to spoken and unspoken expectation, then avoid losing sleep over the review process.

10) Maintain a healthy sense of priorities. Of course, academics are strange people with a strange sense of values. Family, friends and personal well-being should always remain priority over your career. Obviously there will be times when career dominates your life, but as long as a sense perspective is maintained, then the angst of the promotion or tenure process can be kept to a minimum.

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