Illuminating the Path to Promotion and Tenure: Advice for New Professors

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New professors need to be aware of their institution’s tenure and promotion policies, departmental and college climate, scholarly requirements, and professional responsibilities for publication, scholarly presentations, teaching, and service. Vignettes reflect some of the pitfalls and recommendations to consider when seeking tenure. Applications software, Web-based resources, and other forms of technology are assets to those preparing promotion and tenure dossiers and those developing materials that communicate their scholarly interests and activities.

Whether considering a tenure track academic faculty position or currently pursuing the path to tenure or promotion, accurate information and knowledge of institutional expectations are essential. Clarification and guidance from a respected and available mentor can support new professors in numerous ways (Dunn & Moody, 1995; Luna & Cullen, 1995; Mihkelson, 1997; Tauer, 1996).

The purpose of this article is to provide new faculty members with practical insights that lead to promotion and tenure and vignettes of cases where tenure was denied or hindered. The names of professors in the vignettes are fictitious. However, the insights and illustrations paint a holistic picture of university dynamics that can be studied by new faculty to improve their chances of successfully negotiating the path to promotion and tenure.

Tenure and Promotion: The Players

New professors need to be aware that a Promotion and Tenure Committee (PATC) usually decides promotion and tenure for the faculty. Chairs and deans may review and alter those decisions, but a common practice is to follow the recommendations of the PATC. This powerful group, made up of peer representatives, operates under procedures and practices that impact faculty lives, so new professors should get to know each of these members. Promotion and tenure are combined decisions at many institutions; determinations are usually made after a critical and careful review of a 5-to-6 year window of faculty productivity in the areas of teaching, research or other creative endeavors, and service. Recently hired faculty should become familiar with the guidelines, forms, procedures, deadlines, and docu-
mentation described in the faculty handbook. Tenure is being critically evaluated at some institutions for several reasons, including its perceived impact on faculty productivity, academic freedom, and university finances; some suggest that it be restructured and reevaluated (Ovington, Diamantes, & Roby, 2003; Tierney, 1997). Until it is changed, tenure needs to be pursued in an aggressive manner.

Promotion and tenure decisions are usually based on teaching performance, service, research, publications, presentations, creativity, and collegiality. Peer support has been successful in enhancing faculty performance in scholarship, service, and teaching (Follo, Gibson, Echart, & Tracy, 1995). At Oakland University in Rochester, colleagues support each other’s individual endeavors by providing “assistance to faculty in coping with the manifold demands at all levels of their institutional careers” (p. 15). Most faculty consider whether a candidate is able to work in a collegial manner with others in the department. The basic question is: Can the candidate function within the community of scholars? If the candidate is disruptive, temperamental, or a constant complainer, a lack of acceptable collegiality may be used to deny tenure (Bukalski, 2000; Connell & Savage, 2001).

Vignette #1: A tenured associate professor, John Smith, is hired from another institution on a 3-year appointment under the assumption that he will apply for tenure during the 2nd year. However, at the end of 2 years, Smith’s tenure application is denied. The reason given was lack of collegiality—Dr. Smith made little effort to dialogue with established faculty about departmental/college needs, fulfill service commitments, or make a personal contribution to the department and college. He was not present and available for informal communication; and failed to learn the rules and protocol of the office, determine the major players, and learn their opinions of the department.

Vignette #2: A professor, Jane Jones, does not have good rapport with doctoral students in the department. She is often considered argumentative, difficult, and intimidating. On several occasions, students have become distraught. Dr. Jones’ application for tenure is denied, and she is shocked by colleagues who are unsympathetic. The reason given for denial of tenure was lack of collegiality when working with doctoral students.

Vignette #3: An assistant professor, John Johnson, is a bright scholar with many credits, but he is obnoxious, overbearing, and lacks team spirit. His unwillingness to work cooperatively and his constant trouble-making within the department cause problems. Although Dr. Johnson is an asset on several levels, his application for promotion and tenure is denied. The reason given was lack of collegiality.

A tenure decision can be costly for an institution. Recruiting, interviewing, and the combination of an individual’s salary, benefits, space requirements, technology resources, print resources and materials, and other expenses can range from $400,000 to $600,000 or more over the course of time required for many tenure track decisions. This figure increases dramatically depending on the individual’s rank, salary, and discipline. Colleges and universities seek to attract and retain the best and the brightest new academicians to justify costs, attract students, and accomplish the institution’s goals and directives. With this financial commitment at stake, university and college committees carefully screen and sift new faculty to anticipate their productivity, contribution, potential, and ability to work within the existing community of scholars. Most new professors need a plan and a strong scholarly record in order to be successful.

Planning for Promotion and Tenure

Favorable promotion and tenure outcomes do not occur instantaneously or without effort. Positive results occur through good planning, time management, and collaborative scholarship. A successful candidate for promotion and tenure makes a plan during the first semester of the appointment. This strategic process is iterative and formative; it begins with the creation of a research agenda. The agenda should be multi-faceted, linked by related ideas, and demonstrative of a variety of the candidate’s skills and knowledge. When the new faculty member’s research, teaching, and service
projects are related, the body of work is easier to interpret and present.

Time management is a part of the planning process. Daily activities may be apportioned between research, teaching, and service, with the new professor spending more time on research and less time on service. It is possible to become overwhelmed by service commitments, brainstorming sessions, committee assignments, luncheons, and conference attendance; therefore, the beginning scholar must choose projects carefully. Those that fit within the research agenda should be selected initially. After tenure is granted, scholars may expand into other areas and select projects based on individual interests, community improvement, and business and school partnerships.

Collaboration, a key part of the planning process, may double productivity when new scholars work with more established colleagues. Many funding opportunities and large projects are considered when there is collaboration.

Importance of a Strong Record of Scholarship

Scholarship in the form of publications and presentations is essential for the promotion and tenure of most faculty members. The beginning scholar must have a highly productive agenda that reflects many refereed, quality publications and professional activities. This trend comes at a time when the pressure on new academicians is mounting, because most institutions in higher education are expecting more of candidates than they did 10 years ago (Wilson, 2001).

“Publish, publish, publish” is now the rallying cry of many administrators. “Publish or perish,” a phrase common in academe, is a constant reality for most faculty members. Publications often are by-products of research, observation, practical applications of theory, and formal experimentation. Faculty publish their findings to convey what was learned, to make positive contributions to the discipline, to advance their careers, to demonstrate productivity, and to stimulate the ideas and creative interests of others (Finley, 2000; Jackson, Nelson, Heggins, Baatz, & Schuh, 1999; Kussrow, 2001; Weber, 2000). Publications demonstrate continued productivity, and the number needed for promotion and tenure varies by discipline and institution.

Workloads and the constant pressure to publish can be stressful for both junior and senior faculty as the number of expected publications grows (Newman, 1999). An accepted practice is authoring with others in the field. This can be extremely productive, thus reducing the pressure on one person. When individuals have similar work ethics, adhere to agreed-upon deadlines, use analogous writing styles, have the skills to work together, respect each other’s points-of-view, and have the ability to compromise, coauthoring works well. This can be a rewarding and creative endeavor that transfers knowledge, informs, and promotes collegiality.

Many institutions give additional weight to traditional, print-based national and international refereed professional journal articles. When writing papers for publication, contact journal editors and inquire about the journal’s timetable. If a journal is running behind schedule, notification of acceptance or rejection of a manuscript may be delayed. It may take 3-to-6 months for authors to know whether or not their manuscripts have been accepted for publication, and it is important to know this before submitting work to a journal. Care should be taken when submitting to electronic journals. New scholars should inquire about the department’s position on electronic publications, their quality, and acceptableness.

Vignette #4: An assistant professor, James Doe, is likeable, a respected teacher, and is involved in service. He is an exceptional statistician who spends a great deal of time helping doctoral students with their dissertation research and analyzing statistical data for college committees. Dr. Doe, admired for excellence in teaching and service, has few publications when approaching the 5th year in the promotion and tenure cycle. Therefore, he begins to search for another position, knowing that his application will be denied. The reason given by the PATC for rejection of his application was a weak record of scholarship. Dr. Doe could have been writing about exceptional teaching and statistical analyses, and he may have served as a co-writer of articles with some of the doctoral candidates and their major professors.
**Vignette #5**: Kim Smith, an assistant professor, is productive in presentations, publications, research, service, and teaching. She has received above-average progress reports each year. However, the PATC did not recommend tenure. The reason given was that the professionally refereed journals were not weighty enough for tenure. Initially, Dr. Smith could have requested information from colleagues related to the acceptability of journals.

**Vignette #6**: Dr. Bailey, an accomplished researcher, publisher, and teacher with average teacher evaluations, was shown to have acceptable responses by the PATC. However, when materials were evaluated, she was denied tenure. The reason given was a lack of collegiality. Dr. Bailey appealed the denial of tenure, and the University PATC found in her favor. When the process was completed and Bailey was tenured, she began to bring flowers from her garden to the entry table in the departmental office, provided cookies for the faculty refreshment area, and established an annual Christmas party in her home for faculty, staff, students, and other friends. She became a beloved professor in the eyes of many of her colleagues and students.

**Vignette #7**: Dr. Brown, an accomplished associate professor, received favorable ratings over the years in all areas. However, the chair of his department would not recommend him for tenure because, “I do not like him.” The University PATC found in favor of Dr. Brown, who has continued in his position for at least 20 years. The chair is gone.

It is recommended that scholars keep records and materials that support their faculty evaluations. These may be needed during each step of the tenure appeal. During one of the author’s 6 years on the university tenure committee, in all of cases where appeals resulted in tenure, the individuals continued to be productive in scholarly areas, service, and teaching. They worked to enhance collegiality and were highly visible in university activities.

**Presentations: Dissemination of Scholarly Activity**

Nationally and internationally reviewed and accepted proposals for presentations are usually given greater weight in the institution’s evaluation process. Some professional associations announce the titles and types of presentations they will consider at least a year in advance of their annual conference. Calls for conference proposals may be on their Internet sites, in their professional journals, and in the annual program. Each professional organization will have specific requirements for proposals; concise responses should be typed in the order of appearance on the form. In addition to what is listed, new professionals may want to list references used in developing their topic and include a brief resume. These need to be on separate pages, since many organizations use a blind review process. However, an established presenter finds ways to reflect who they are through their writings, even when the proposal is blind-reviewed. Proposals are usually selected based on their perceived value to the conference, their scope, their support of the conference theme, and the goals of the professional organization sponsoring the conference.

When proposals for workshops, poster sessions, and round tables arrive, office personnel may scan them to see if they are suitable for peer review. Some of the larger organizations might receive all of the submissions needed within 6 months of the initial call. Therefore, it is advisable to submit proposals as soon as possible. An additional tip is to be a co-presenter with a colleague who is a successful presenter. This helps a new professor develop skills and establish a professional reputation. While attending a conference, networking is also critical. Exchanging information with other presenters and attendees enhances the possibility of cross-disciplinary work and sets the stage for research across institutions.

For workshops and other types of presentations, many organizations, hotels, or media agencies charge for using media equipment; however, overhead projectors may be provided. It is advisable to back-up a PowerPoint presentation with transparencies or handouts, in case the equipment is faulty, undelivered, or unavailable, and bring a laptop or upload the presentation to the Web for audience viewing, if Internet access...
is available. Two additional methods of presenting work are through poster sessions and round tables. For poster presentations, the tables for displaying posters are usually provided by the association. Presenters may consider designing and having constructed or purchasing a folding poster board that is small enough to be placed under an airline seat. Some departments have poster boards that can be borrowed for conferences.

Planning forces presenters to thoroughly examine the message to be provided within an allotted time frame. Faculty members need to carefully consider the purposes, delivery systems, participants, activities, and communications during the session (Horowitz, 1996). While planning the content of a lecture, workshop, or poster presentation, speakers should consider the audience and tie new information to their established concepts and ideas (Garmston, 2000; Horowitz, 1996). Successful discourse takes place when a presenter identifies with the group, sets a relaxed atmosphere, makes content meaningful through the use of humorous metaphors and analogies, senses the mood of participants, and draws attention to important aspects of the topic. Participants should feel that they can explore issues in a mutual and psychologically safe learning environment. This type of atmosphere fosters respect and positive dialogue.

Some presentations include audience movement (Garmston, 2000). Physical activity may depend upon the time allotted for a session. Active participants are interested, involved, and better able to tune into the message provided. Physical movement can reduce boredom and promote deeper breathing, which allows the brain to receive and send information. Activity can also help learners retain more of the presentation.

Before presenting, a speaker should arrive at the site early, set up, and check lighting, equipment, and room acoustics. It is preferable to allow time for an evaluation during the last minutes of a session. Open-ended questions or a Likert scale may be utilized, and responses can be collected, analyzed, and saved. This is one way to determine the impact of a session.

Presentations provide opportunities for dialogue with colleagues, exploration of new ideas, and the possible collaboration for joint research projects. These peers may also serve as co-writers and co-presenters for future sessions.

**Importance of Research**

Candidates need to spend a great deal of time on research projects, because these translate into funding for graduate research or teaching assistants, travel, professional memberships, conference registration fees, and a host of other expenses that professors incur. Additionally, monies secured from internal and external grants help establish a positive national and international reputation, buy equipment, create and operate research laboratories, and fund extra-curricular networking activities. All are invaluable aids for the beginning professor.

Research is critical to the long-term success of most scholars. New faculty members might explore the possibility of having senior colleagues serve as mentors. The advice of more senior researchers could be requested to locate funding sources, complete required applications, develop successful strategies for obtaining finances, review proposals, and provide responses to the following questions:

- What types of grants are being funded?
- Are there start-up funds for the research agendas of new faculty?
- Does the university have programs that offer seed money for larger, external grants?
- Is there a university research office that can clarify procedures, assist with signatures, provide information on matching funds and submission deadlines, and contribute in other ways?
- What research is currently being funded, and how can personal interests be linked?

**Importance of Teaching**

Satisfactory teaching evaluations are the primary evidence for acceptable instruction, but other vehicles that document excellence include the teaching portfolio, quality course materials, peer reviews, and student comments (Bukalski, 2000; Murray, 1995). Students’ opinions are an important part of a faculty member’s assessment, and they may be balanced by thorough documentation of teaching performance, including syllabi, examples of examinations, samples of student expectations and student work, published textbooks and materials, numbers of new course prepara-
tions, and other materials. New faculty members can document efforts to improve personal teaching skills through attendance at workshops and involvements in teaching mentorships with distinguished university instructors. Students can provide faculty with feedback on their performance before the end-of-course evaluation to help new faculty focus and make changes where appropriate.

Preparing, teaching, grading, and recording results for multiple classes; holding individual conferences with students; and keeping abreast of current textbooks and other professional literature are essential and time-consuming activities. New professors should:

- Seek clarification on available classroom technology and support, staff assistance, and provisions established for developing, maintaining, and updating courses delivered over the Web.
- Inquire about the number of course preparations required annually, teaching loads, average number of students per class, whether courses are graduate or undergraduate, student advising tasks, mentorship to undergraduate and graduate students, and weekly office hours.
- Find out whether all classes are held on campus and if some will be offered at other sites or through distance learning (VTEL or Web-based).
- Ask about student assistants and the types of jobs that can be expected of them.
- Inquire about expectations related to research, publications, presentations, service, and other areas that will impact promotion and tenure. These responses will serve as an indicator of the amount of time to be allocated to teaching responsibilities. Responses to queries will vary by institution and department, but they indicate the overall workload for a position. Detailed information on teaching is found in the article, “Teaching, Technology, and Support in the New Millennium: A Guide for New Community College Teachers,” by Ennis-Cole and Lawhon (in press).

The teaching effectiveness of new professors is aided and enhanced by using technology to deliver content, organize and chart class progress, and make content visually appealing. PowerPoint presentations, notes stored on the Web, and links to additional resources and information are helpful to students. Student progress may be recorded, stored, and charted by using spreadsheet and projection software. Links to content experts, chat rooms, and visuals are another way to use technology to support the teaching and learning process. Most institutions of higher education expect satisfactory instruction, but this is only one area of the workload.

Vignette #8: An assistant professor, Leslie Whitman, is disappointed by an unfavorable tenure decision based on teaching and research. Dr. Whitman, actively involved in online teaching, welcomed the new technology and saw it as a method of conducting research on teaching. What she did not realize is that online classes take more time than many traditional face-to-face courses that she had taught, and that there are few standards and evaluative tools to verify the quality of online courses and online publications (Kiernan, 2000). The reason given for the tenure denial was inadequate teaching and research.

Vignette #9: An associate professor, Paul Pepper, worked prolonged hours in the laboratory, delivered class content, and was congenial. However, teaching evaluations were poor. Students’ comments reflected that he is a brilliant man, but that the lectures are given in monotone; he avoids eye contact by looking out the window; and he has body odor and other poor personal grooming habits. Tenure was denied. The reason given by the PATC was poor teacher ratings.

Constructive criticism can be painful, but a lack of feedback can be fatal. Faculty should seek out a mentor or colleague and ask for input on personal and professional development.

Importance of Service

Service expectations vary by institution and department. For example, Holden and Black (1996) reported that faculty members in psychology provided “significant amounts of time in clinical service (30%) and research (34%)” (p. 407). Fox and Rossi (2001) encourage faculty in Professional Development Schools not to rely on PDS activities alone, but to pursue their own scholarly interests; however, they caution that non-
tenured faculty, even those with exemplary records in teaching and service, are highly unlikely to make promotion and tenure if they are lacking in publications and presentations.

Usually, service is performed at the program, department, college, university, community, state, national, and international levels. However, new professors may need to limit their time and involvement in service (Golde, 1999), because it can interfere with the momentum needed for conducting research, writing professional articles, developing professional presentations, preparing class activities, experimenting with technology, and other necessary projects. They could consider providing service to the program and department exclusively during the early stage of their appointment, and then expand after becoming established. Additional appointments could demonstrate increasing levels of responsibility and leadership as the new professor moves from committee member to committee chair or program coordinator. Service involvement in professional organizations enriches the lives of new professors as they develop important supportive friendships with peers. These individuals can be helpful to each other when seeking mentors, grants, letters of recommendation for tenure or for a new position, and coauthors for publications and presentations.

Committee assignments need to be selected carefully during the non-tenured stage. Some committee interactions and decisions can create dissention among faculty members, and this could be damaging to tenure and promotion prospects.

Technology and Beginning Scholars

New faculty members need socialization and interactions with colleagues. There are also occasions when they must seek assistance, especially when being introduced to new technology.

Technological equipment, computerized tools, hardware, and application-oriented software assist new faculty members in their research, publications, presentations, and other requirements of the professorate. Technology-based presentations, whether at conferences or in the classroom, can produce positive gains in participants’ motivations, retentions, attitudes, and learning (Coughlin, 1999; Gunter, Gunter, & Wiens, 1998; Sherry, 1997; Smith, Whiteley, & Smith, 1999).

Computers are used to deliver, package, and build audio-visual products, multimedia presentations, visual materials, and end-user products. The ability to effectively use and integrate technology and model computer-based tools is important to successful academicians in the 21st century (Gonzales & Thompson, 1998). Applications software, like word processing, spreadsheet, and statistical analysis programs, can be used to develop, revise, and store grant documentation, articles, graphs, tables, and data sets. New professors will find application software flexible, user-friendly, and easily obtainable. These tools can produce high-quality materials including presentations and Web sites.

Universities may have site licenses with vendors that permit the personnel to obtain copies of software at reduced prices. The campus bookstore, director of technology, departmental assistant, and campus computing center can provide input on titles, prices, availability, and licensing information. Several packages include electronic communication tools; Web site development titles; software suites which contain word processing, spreadsheet, database, and mail packages; statistical analysis programs; and graphics software (Bird, 1998; Leh 1998). Which specific titles and brands are needed is based on contact with vendors, the operational environment, product availability, and local information.

Additionally, Web-based resources provide a wealth of relevant information for literature reviews. Contact with editors and domain experts can be made via the Internet. Data collection may be conveniently performed through discussion groups, on-line surveys, Web sites developed to support research projects, and Internet access to the local university library, U. S. Federal Agencies, and Federal Depositories.

Conclusion

Research, professional publications, scholarly presentations, and other creative endeavors are increasingly important to a faculty member’s retention and future employment prospects. Satisfactory teacher evaluations and some service responsibilities also are expected. Technology can assist the new professor in
meeting the multiple demands of academia. The input and support of others, and familiarity with institutional information related to tenure and promotion, are crucial to the success of new faculty members. Vignettes illustrate cases where tenure track faculty could have benefited by greater insight and a supportive and candid mentor, PATC, and chair.

References


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