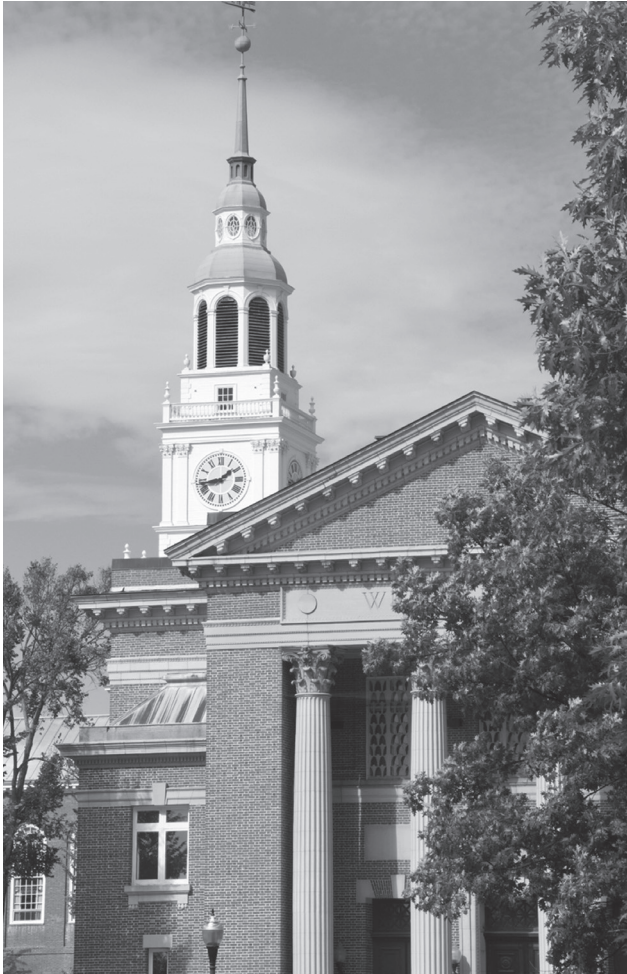


HOW TO MAKE TENURE

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INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, I became concerned over the number of young assistant professors who were not successfully navigating the tenure process. I saw a number of really talented people who experienced what for an academic is major failure—yet was preventable. They were not approaching the tenure process in the right way, they did not have a good strategy for negotiating the process, they were misallocating their time and effort, and I thought perhaps some good fatherly advice from an older professor could be beneficial. When universities do offer seminars on how to make tenure, they really don't address the kinds of things I think are helpful to young professors. They cover information from the faculty handbook, but they can't say some of the hard things that I wanted to say; things which really need to be said.

Before we launch ahead, let me tell you about my qualifications for speaking on tenure issues. For twenty years I was a member of my departmental tenure committee, serving as chair on several occasions. I was also appointed as a representative from my department to the college promotion and tenure committee on about five occasions for a year each time, and served one term as chair of the college committee. I also served for two years as chair of my department. So I've seen the tenure process from several different perspectives. I know what goes on in promotion and tenure deliberations. Based on those experiences, I've summarized here some suggestions which I think you will find helpful.

First, a simple word of caution. No one is going to be looking out for you as you work toward tenure. The obligation is on you to manage your experience through the promotion and tenure process. When a young assistant professor does not make tenure, it's too late to point the finger at senior professors in the department, or at university administrators, and complain, "You didn't tell me this," or, "I didn't understand that." No one is going to do these things for you; no one is even going to check to make sure that you're doing them for yourself. So the things I'm advising you to do are things for which you, and you alone, are responsible.

GATHER THE RELEVANT MATERIALS

Begin understanding the tenure process by gathering the relevant materials. These typically include your university's faculty handbook, and perhaps some departmental or college guidelines which supplement the university's faculty handbook. You need to become thoroughly familiar with what is contained in these materials. Years ago, before the earth's crust hardened, I was a Boy Scout; we each had a copy of the Boy Scout Manual. We carried it around everywhere, and we used to memorize the requirements for advancing from rank to rank. This is what I'm advising you to do. Make sure that you thoroughly understand the written materials in your university's faculty handbook, and that you understand any supplemental guidelines from your department or college. Typically, these additional requirements will be more rigorous than the university's guidelines. They may point you in a slightly different direction or emphasize some things which are not in the general guidelines.

INTERVIEW COLLEAGUES

Not many deans have open door policies with their faculty, but if you can gain an opportunity to interview your dean, by all means do so. Your department chair certainly should welcome the opportunity to sit down with you from time to time to talk about how you're doing and what the expectations are, and you certainly should avail yourself of this opportunity. Talk with senior professors in the department about the tenure pro-

cess; what it was like in the past, what it's like now, and how you fit into that scenario. Talk with some recently-tenured professors, either in your department or in your college. They are great sources of information.

Let me share an example that will underscore why talking to a lot of people is useful. A number of years ago, I served on an external review committee of a department in another college of the university. As I looked over the vitas of the departmental faculty, I was frankly shocked at the lack of focus on scholarly research—there were senior professors, for example, who had large amounts of funding from external sources with virtually no refereed publications. Moreover, the department chair was unbelievably naïve vis-à-vis the university's research expectations. Some time later, in doing a Tenure Seminar, one of the attendees came up after the talk and identified himself as an untenured member of this same department. He had been at the university for a few years and had gotten bad advice from his department chair and from the senior professors in the department and he was afraid, based on what I had covered in the seminar, he would not be able to earn tenure. Fortunately the story has a happy ending, because he immediately refocused his strategy along the lines I proposed and was able to succeed. Another year or two and he would certainly have failed—not at the department level, but when his situation was reviewed at the college level.

ASSESS YOUR SPECIFIC SITUATION

Evaluate the stated requirements for promotion and tenure which are listed in the various materials you've collected. One question new professors always ask is, "How many publications is it going to take for me to make tenure?" The bad news is that you're never going to be able to "turn to page ten" in your handbook and see exactly how many publications are expected for promotion. The good news is that if you talk to enough people, you'll be able to discover the magnitude of that number. And if that number is say ten, don't go up for tenure "on the bubble;" have twelve—allow yourself some slack.

Get a clear understanding of the tenure process at your institution. Typically it involves at least a departmental promotion and tenure committee which meets on an annual basis. There will be a college-wide committee as well.

From your very first year at the university you should be getting good feedback, especially from your departmental committee. It is your responsibility to make sure that you get very specific feedback. If you just get some nice pat-on-the-back, “feel good” information, you need to go to your department chair and say, “I appreciate the nice sentiment, but it’s not really pointing me to specific things I need to be doing.”

Evaluate your colleagues—how much support will you be able to get from them? Do they want you to succeed in the tenure process? If not, then it will change how you go through the process. In my department, we only hired individuals whom we wanted to succeed, so we worked very closely with them to ensure that they did. Unfortunately this is not the case everywhere.

✦ DEFINE THE TARGET ✦

When defining your target, realize that there are two extremes on the tenure spectrum. At state and private research universities, it is expected that professors do scholarly research and publish their results, that is, “publish or perish” is not just a catchy phrase. A secondary expectation at research institutions is that professors be solid classroom teachers. The other extreme is the liberal arts college. Quality teaching is the requirement in such institutions, with the secondary expectation of some research. Most colleges or universities will fit somewhere on this continuum.

I am now going to give you a strategy which, in my experience, will work regardless of where your institution lies on this spectrum. This is what I would recommend to any young assistant professor, regardless of his or her situation. We typically speak of a professor’s job in terms of teaching, research, and service, so I would like to address these, in a little different order.