

A Successful Path to Tenure and Promotion

John R. Williams, Martin Pike
Purdue University School of Technology at Kokomo

Abstract

Successful attainment of tenure and promotion at the end of a five-year path is the reward for the effort extended. This paper discusses the path, the process and the techniques used to ensure success, on the first attempt. Not everyone achieves tenure and promotion in their first effort. The roles of the mentors, the candidate, the department head and senior faculty are discussed. Key suggestions and questions that should be asked are offered for the candidates at every level of the process. While this paper discusses the Purdue University tenure process, these keys should be adaptable to other schools and universities.

The authors have written two previous papers on the topic, and this paper completes the trilogy, on a successful note. However, even failure to achieve promotion and tenure should be seen as simply another opportunity, and can be utilized as a tool toward career development.

Introduction

The authors have presented two papers in previous sessions^{1,2} dealing with mentoring and the process of promotion and tenure. This paper completes the story of a successful tenure and promotion effort. Each of the major components, teaching, research and creative endeavor, and service are discussed, with emphasis on those components most familiar to the authors. The successful path to promotion and tenure also includes not only the activities and achievements of the candidate, but also the input and assistance of mentors, department head and senior faculty. These aspects will also be discussed as they relate to the success or failure to achieve promotion and tenure.

This particular story ends in success. Promotion and tenure were granted to an author. It is important to remember that this paper would still have been written even if the journey had ended with a different result. The path is always a learning process. Every step is an important piece of the whole puzzle, and the last piece is no more critical than the first. Failure to attain promotion and tenure would indicate that the puzzle has not yet been completed, not that the puzzle was incorrectly constructed or there were overwhelming weaknesses in the puzzle construction. As with every puzzle, successful completion is a function of eventually putting all the pieces together correctly, making some mistakes along the way but correcting and recovering from the mistakes is key. This paper is an attempt to help new faculty to avoid the big mistakes and recover from errors efficiently.

The Path

Most tenure processes include three aspects of activity and achievement. These are teaching, research and creative endeavor, as well as service. Many candidates will develop a history of work in each of these areas. Usually, an individual will have two strong areas and the third area will be weaker. This is not usually a concern for promotion from assistant to associate professor. In addition, institutions usually expect a given candidate to be strong in two areas, hopefully the two areas of most concern to the school or department. This is one of the major keys to the successful candidate, determining what two areas are the ones most important to stress and show the most achievement. It is important that the candidate find out what is expected of them very early in their teaching career. Questions to ask of the department head and senior faculty are: What areas have the most weight? What areas are currently, and for the foreseeable future, not addressed as well as they should be by the current faculty? Are the expectations a moving target? What hidden agendas are there? If you are replacing a failed candidate, why were they unsuccessful?

As important as the activities and achievements noted above are, how are these accomplishments and activities communicated to those who make the decisions on promotion and tenure? Most colleges and universities have a formal periodic review of untenured faculty in addition to a formal, usually tiered, committee based process for approval for tenure and promotion. Often, the review processes depends on a written document, usually prepared by the candidate. This document is important not only as a formal list of your accomplishments, but it represents you to those who do not know you, but must make judgments for promotion and tenure. Some questions to ask regarding this document are: Is there a preferred or required format? Do you have access to the documents of successful candidates? What help from the department head or senior faculty can be expected in preparing the document? Does the document stand on its own or may supporting evidence be included? Supporting evidence may be numerical or written teaching evaluations by students and senior faculty, copies of publications, and letters of recommendation from other colleagues from teaching, research or service activities.

At Purdue University School of Technology we are fortunate to have a handbook³ that details the form and content of the promotion and tenure document. It is a stated requirement that the untenured faculty are to use the document form specified in the handbook for annual reviews. This provides three distinct advantages. First, from the beginning, each candidate starts with the correct form of document and each year it should grow with added achievements. When the candidate is ready to go through the tenure approval process, the document is already in the required form. Second, annual reviews are more helpful to the candidate because suggestions are made as to content, achievements, direction of efforts, and form, so the documentation is presented effectively. Third, using the handbook as a guide for the document indirectly serves as a reminder list of areas that may need more concentration of effort in order to fill in gaps of expected achievement.

Each of the three areas of teaching, research and creative endeavor, and service have their own special particulars that should be emphasized. The next three sections deal with each area in turn.

Teaching

This is the primary area of effort for schools where classroom teaching is a primary interest. Even in some research oriented universities, the trend is that teaching is being elevated to higher importance. Since teaching is a primary area of activity, it should have a high level of achievement. Teaching may be separated into the two components of instructional delivery and instructional development. If one thinks seriously about the art and science of teaching, it is clear that these two components have a huge impact on student learning and, in reflection, the candidate's achievement. In essence, both of these components are distinct, yet interdependent. Effective delivery depends upon careful planning and development. Course development depends on the commitment of continual improvement of delivery and subject mastery. The measurement of teaching effectiveness often takes the form of student evaluations, peer evaluations and observations, and teaching awards or other recognition. Evaluations, however done, are not a popularity contest. Learn from the results. Build on the strengths to improve the weaknesses. Experiment and alter courses as appropriate to improve student learning. For example, a recent paper by Professor Charles Thomas⁴ discusses a very simple experiment that he did on a single course. For the first half of the course, he used the blackboard lecture method, and for the second half of the course he used an overhead projector. He surveyed the class as to their preference. The results clearly indicated that the transparency method was successful and worth the effort.

Instructional Development

The usual, regular things one does for classroom preparation like syllabi, lecture notes, tests and commonplace visual aids are expected of every teacher. Instructional development must include things that are distinctive and relevant. The key to instructional development is to determine what will give a new or better twist to the topic to improve student learning. If students learn more or quicker, this will be reflected in better student evaluations in addition to being an achievement that can be included in the tenure document. If new technology, processes or procedures are added to a course, they also would count as instructional development. Other instructional development activities include the development of computer based tutorials, handbooks for laboratory exercises, textbooks, innovative laboratory experiments, and design projects.

Every effort in this area must be carefully evaluated for effect. One can learn from failure as well as success. Over time, the net effect should be improvement of both course content and instructor performance. A side benefit of instructional development is that many of the ideas and techniques that may be developed can be used as the basis of publications and presentations at conferences. Thus, the work done for instructional purposes, may also help present a record of achievement in the research and creative endeavor aspect of your document.

Research and Creative Endeavor

This part of the requirements is primary for people in institutions where research carries a large part of the educational effort. It also plays an important role for those who are primarily teachers. The measurable achievement in this area is publication of papers in journals and proceedings, presentations at conferences, technical commercial published text books, and a history of

external funding. There are two basic types of research and creative endeavor, advancement of current knowledge, and pedagogical concepts. The department head and senior faculty can give insight as to the weight of the type of publication and the kinds of research and creative endeavor that would be preferable at your institution. A key to success is to pursue all reasonable opportunities for publication and presentation even if the publication type or particular journal may not carry as much weight as something more “prestigious.” This is one area where both quantity and quality matter. It is better to have one paper per year over a five year period with two being in top notch journals than it is to only have the two journal articles in the same time period. In addition, work presented in “lower level” publications may lead to opportunities higher up the prestige scale. In a related way, it is also important to properly pace publications showing a consistent history of accomplishment. One paper per year over five years is more impressive than three papers in the fifth year alone regardless of the “quality” of the journal or conference.

Service

This is an important, but secondary, component for most faculty. If one has administrative duties, this area becomes more important. This area of effort includes recruiting students, participation in professional societies, serving on departmental and school committees, advising and counseling students, as well as dealing with industry. The key to success in service activities is to participate in those activities where you have a natural talent and interest. The effort will be most effective and not seem to detract from the teaching and research activities.

Mentoring

The authors discussed this topic extensively in a previous paper². Mentors are critical to the process of earning tenure and promotion because they provide advice, guidance and direction that leads to a successful result. One may have more than one mentor at a time, but the mentors should work as a team. Newly tenured faculty should consider becoming mentors for new faculty. Certainly, senior faculty should not exclude themselves from the process. One should seek advice from the department head and dean where possible. He or she are important to the process, as noted before, while probably being too busy to act as a mentor. A good mentor is another key to success. Both the candidate and the mentor must agree to have an open, honest and confidential relationship. The mentor must be active in responding to inquires and also be pro-active if the candidate is having difficulties or going in the wrong direction.

Conclusion

Upon a candidate’s initial appointment to a tenure track position, many years of work lie ahead. The key to attaining tenure and promotion is a record of significant achievements in teaching, research and creative endeavor, and service. The key to attaining quality and quantity of achievements is to start working on the first day of appointment by seeking advice as to opportunities in, and importance of, the three areas. Next, find a mentor. Then start working on the most important aspects first. The goal is to establish a consistent record of achievement over time. Use annual reviews as an opportunity to expand your record, modify direction, and start

working on filling gaps in the record. Lastly, throughout the process, regularly update and correct the document that will be used for the tenure and promotion approval process.

References

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JOHN WILLIAMS is Assistant Professor of Mechanical Engineering Technology at Purdue University. He holds a B.S.M.E. degree from Rose Hulman Institute of Technology and an M.S.E. degree from Purdue University. He joined Purdue University after 34 years of service with the Allison Gas Turbine Division of General Motors. He is a Registered Professional Engineer and is a member of ASEE, and ASME.

MARTIN PIKE is an Associate Professor of Mechanical Engineering Technology at Purdue University at Kokomo. He has over thirteen years of teaching experience in addition to six years experience in industry as a design and development engineer. He earned a BSME in 1977, an MSE in 1981 and Dr. Sci. in Engineering in 1990.