

Challenges and Opportunities in Visiting and Tenure Track Positions

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Abstract

There are challenges and opportunities in both visiting and tenure track positions. Many faculty members start their teaching career in visiting positions and end up in the tenure stream. In that case the faculty member would be faced with somewhat different set of challenges and opportunities, the subject of this paper. The transition from a visiting position to tenure-track position is a process. For this process to succeed, it requires time management and efforts including a solid long-term plan that starts during the visiting position as well as an effective mentoring program. This paper attempts to address issues related to both visiting and tenure positions including ways a visiting position can best serve a faculty in transition and the importance of a successful mentoring program in ensuring a smooth transition from visiting to tenure and ultimately gaining tenure. The paper also provides suggestions and advice for success to new faculty joining either visiting or tenure track positions.

Introduction

This paper addresses issues related to visiting and tenure track positions in primarily undergraduate institutions that put excellence in teaching first. In particular, the paper discusses the situation where a faculty member starts in a visiting position with the intention to continue to a tenure-track position.

Visiting positions are temporary in nature and could be full-time or part-time employment. They are usually offered for sabbatical replacements or hiring transition periods. These temporary positions tend to attract new graduates who wish to start a career in higher education and get teaching experience. Tenure track positions, on the other hand, are established for longer commitments and upon tenure the faculty is likely to become a permanent member of the university.

Teaching is the primary assignment in visiting positions, yet many programs do not facilitate student evaluations or program feedback to the visiting faculty due to the short employment durations. In addition, most teaching visiting positions have little or no requirement for scholarship or service. The case is almost the opposite with tenure track positions where teaching excellence is emphasized and monitored using feedback from students and supervising faculty. In the tenure stream, even at teaching institutions, the faculty member is expected to perform research and engage in college and university service activities.

A faculty member pursuing a career in academia is usually faced with a decision regarding the kind of position he/she plans to take. The first question that must be answered is: do I like teaching or research more? Those who love research activities will pursue a career in institutions that also value research activities more than teaching. Others who love teaching and desire to keep it their main focus are likely to pursue a career at teaching institutions that value teaching excellence and without emphasis on research activities and funded research projects.

In addition to visiting and tenure-track positions, some faculty prefer non-tenure track (lecturer positions) as a career with no intention to continue to tenure track positions. They are usually satisfied with their choice for reasons including less stress, more flexibility, their love and passion for teaching, and the desire to put teaching first and research and service second. One noted personal benefit that most lecturers enjoy is the opportunity to devote more time to their homes and families, thereby improving their overall quality of life. ⁽¹⁾

One faculty noted “I would rather be a yearly contracted employee knowing that my students are truly learning and appreciating my sharing of knowledge, then worry about the deadline for my next journal article”.⁽²⁾ Some of the specific reasons reported for choosing lecturer positions are the desire to interact with undergraduate students and influence undergraduate education, the desire for additional job flexibility, and the risk in being viewed as the “volunteer” for all departmental service.⁽²⁾

The main cons of lecturer positions as compared to tenure-track positions were reported to be lack of job security, lower salaries, and lack of respect within the department (not being allowed to vote).⁽²⁾

Opportunities and Challenges in Visiting Positions

There are many unique opportunities in visiting positions that make them worthy of consideration. Many openings do not require prior teaching experience and hiring departments will be willing to consider candidates before completing their graduate program and earn their graduate degrees. This makes it a valuable opportunity for graduate students who are working on their thesis. They can secure a teaching position and eventually complete their graduate programs while teaching in the second institution. This particular situation requires good time management to be able to finish a thesis while assuming responsibilities in a full-time teaching position.

Visiting positions are usually for one or two academic years. The advantage in the short employment period is that the faculty member is not stuck in a long process as is the case in tenure-track positions where he/she must perform well at all levels (teaching, research, and service) from the first year. The visiting position gives the faculty member, who has little or no teaching experience, a golden opportunity to use all his/her time experimenting and learning how to teach and developing a teaching career without the pressure of a tenure process that requires the faculty member to find time to do research and service as well.

Student evaluations may not be required in visiting positions but using them would benefit the visiting faculty. The feed back from students can be used to improve teaching and can be valuable evidence of good teaching potential in applications for tenure-track positions. With that much time available for the teaching faculty in visiting positions, they can also use this time to make the necessary transition from being graduate students or teaching assistants to becoming independent professors in charge of teaching whole courses. It takes time and effort to learn how to deal with students in and outside the classroom as well as how to deal with colleagues and university administrators.

Many departments give the visiting faculty the option to attend department meetings and to participate in service committees. These are great opportunities to learn how things get done in a department without being heavily involved in the responsibilities. Faculty members on a tenure-track are likely to take the lead in committee work at the department or university levels. Taking advantage of provided opportunities in visiting positions can be extremely helpful to faculty members who plan to pursue tenure-track positions later. In many institutions an opening starts as a visiting position but later becomes a tenure-track opportunity upon approval of the funding for the position. In this case, the visiting faculty member who performs well during the visiting period will likely have a distinct advantage to compete for the open tenure-track position.

On the other hand, there are a number of challenges/disadvantages in visiting positions. Perhaps the most obvious one is the fact that visiting positions are short term-employment without long-term job security or a promise of stable career. One concern is when the faculty member moves from one visiting position to another. It takes time to understand how a system works in a university and so visiting faculty member find themselves getting ready to leave a university and join another just about the time they felt comfortable and settled in their jobs.

After a while, the visiting faculty could get stuck in this cycle of being on the move and end up becoming expert in serving departments as a visiting faculty and eventually lose the ability to compete for tenure track positions even when they wish to do so. For instance, departments hiring to fill a tenure-track opening may not vote in favor of a faculty member who doesn't display any stability in his/her previous employment history.

The lack of requirements for research and service in visiting positions may pose another challenge for those wishing to move to tenure-track positions. Without requirements for activities in research and service, the visiting faculty will not find the motivation to do much in these areas, not to mention the challenge in finding time for research and service in the presence of heavy teaching loads. The lack of involvement in research and service activities will make it difficult for the visiting faculty to manage the responsibilities of a tenure track position having been used to teaching only.

The limited freedom available to revise curriculum and develop new courses or electives in visiting positions could also be frustrating for ambitious visiting faculty. Voting on making decisions that will affect department policies and future may not be a privilege for visiting faculty. The justification may be that the visiting faculty lack experience and knowledge of department history and future plans.

Opportunities and Challenges in Tenure-Track Positions

A tenure-track position provides an opportunity for long-term employment with a good chance for a steady state career. Upon tenure the faculty member becomes a permanent member of the university. Tenure and the associated long-term employment status should be accepted for the right reasons including those identified in a faculty survey: ⁽³⁾

- Colleagues, who are fun to work with, are professional and provide a working environment that is conducive to the educational process.
- An academic environment that fosters freedom to develop programs, encourages consulting and research, and places application above theory.
- Working with students who work hard, have a purpose, and appreciate the success they achieve and the role of the instructor in that process.
- The local community, the recreational possibilities, and the opportunities to serve the community in a variety of ways.

The position gives the faculty member an opportunity to establish an identity in the program. The faculty member is not just a replacement that helps the department get through an academic year until the professor on sabbatical leave is back; the faculty member is a real part of the department faculty with the power to vote on issues related to departmental governance. A faculty member in the tenure stream can also be more aggressive in expressing opinions that may lead to changes in the department policies. Another opportunity is the ability to be involved in revising the program curriculum. Making justified changes to improve existing courses or developing new courses is likely to be encouraged and valued in tenure-track positions.

The faculty member is usually given the opportunity to do research and establish a professional development program. Departments hiring tenure-track faculty are willing to invest in developing the faculty member and see him/her succeed. Providing financial support to attend teaching workshops and professional conferences is part of this investment plan a department will have for the new tenure-track faculty member.

New faculty members are encouraged to participate in service to the college and university in the form of memberships in college and university wide committees. These are great opportunities for growth by gaining experience in different areas and different issues. Participation in committee work also gives the new faculty an opportunity to develop relationships within the university community and helps the new faculty member to become assimilated into the community.

Another opportunity available to a new faculty joining a tenure-track position is the involvement in a mentoring program and the opportunity to grow with the help of a mentor. In effective mentoring programs, the mentor takes every opportunity to encourage, assist, cajole, and provide guidance as the new faculty begins the journey to tenure. ⁽⁴⁾ Mentoring may cover at least three areas: mentoring on effective research and scholarship, mentoring on effective teaching, and mentoring on effective time management. ⁽⁵⁾

In addition, mentoring may also involve providing guidance and suggestions for developing relationships within the university community. Specifically, helping new faculty achieve social/emotional acceptance by the students is an important aspect of mentoring. Successfully doing so provides an atmosphere of trust and respect for new faculty members. In turn, this facilitates their intellectual growth while providing an environment that encourages development as a competent researcher and excellent teacher. ⁽⁶⁾

The tenure track environment also allows the new faculty members become themselves leaders and mentors to their students. All teachers are leaders and the only choice is whether to be a good leader or to abdicate the responsibility of leadership. The teacher as mentor has enormous responsibilities that include providing information about careers or majors, providing a place for students to "experience" the professional life that is ahead of them, and to provide a model of professionalism at all times. ⁽⁷⁾

The main challenge in a tenure-track position is of a time management nature. The new faculty member must perform well in teaching, research and service all at the same time. There is no slack time available and a fast start is needed. ⁽⁴⁾ In many institutions where contracts are for three years, the faculty member must submit a dossier for continuance of employment in the fall of second year. The dossier is expected to include evidence of potential success in teaching, professional development, and service to the community and university. ⁽⁴⁾

In tenure-track positions, the faculty member also faces the challenge of balancing work and personal life so that success at work is not accompanied by loss in personal life. Tenure is the all-encompassing rush to the rest of one's life; the six-year sprint to the end of the marathon. Tenure-track professors spend an enormous amount of time "interning" in the teaching profession. The distraction of tenure is its centrality during these six years. It becomes the focus of life, perhaps an obsession for many that overwhelms some new professors. ⁽⁸⁾

Tips and Strategies for Success

During the visiting period the faculty member need to be aware of the requirements for success in tenure-track positions. The visiting faculty member must find time to do more than just teaching even if he/she is hired just to teach. They must manage their time such that daily or weekly time slots are created and allocated to activities related to professional development and service. It is extremely important to take advantage of the opportunities available in visiting positions that were discussed earlier including attending and participating in department meetings as well as volunteering to participate in committees of interest. Performing these optional activities during the visiting period will help the faculty get off to a good and quick start in the tenure-track position.

Before accepting a tenure-track position, try to learn as much as possible about the department and the program to look for signs of organizational instability. The best way to deal with organizational instability is to avoid getting into such a situation by determining the level of support to the program/department from the college/university. If the program/department is not being supported by the higher administration, organizational instability is likely. ⁽⁹⁾

Some key indicators of organizational instability are: high turnover among faculty or department chairs, declining enrollment, lack of well-known or well established faculty members, and incompatibility between the department's and the college's missions. ⁽⁹⁾

Once in the tenure stream, success can only be achieved if a specific plan is established to ensure that the new faculty has a first year filled with activities. ⁽⁴⁾ To get tenure, the following elements have been identified as critical to success. ⁽⁴⁾

- read tenure documents to understand the expectations of the university.
- develop a plan with a viable schedule that will satisfy expectation. Make sure to have a 5-year plan which contains in details the specific expectations in the areas of teaching, research, and service. ⁽⁹⁾
- keep a continuous log of activities
- create a file with all paperwork normally contained in the tenure dossier. Documenting your work may include teaching effectiveness, advising effectiveness, service activities, scholarly, professional, and creative work. ⁽¹⁰⁾
- plan and execute service requirements to ensure adequate participation

It is important to have a good mentor who can coach the new faculty in improving his/ her teaching, developing a research program, and selecting appropriate levels of service ⁽⁹⁾.

According to Boice, the mentor should encourage new faculty to: ^(5, 11)

- limit classroom preparation to a maximum of two hours per hour of lecture after the first offering of a course;
- spend 30-60 minutes a day on scholarly writing;
- spend at least two hours a week on discussions with colleagues focused on teaching and research;
- keep daily records of work time expenditure to help self-monitor how well they are managing their time.

Take all measures to improve teaching. Continuously evaluate your teaching by self reflection and by analyzing students' course evaluations. Seek advice from your mentor and other senior faculty. Visit classrooms of other faculty and ask your mentor and other senior faculty members to attend your classes. You will learn a lot from the feedback.

Attend teaching workshops to learn from other teaching experiences. Effective teaching requires a lot of learning and efforts but it is also a lot of fun. The junior faculty in this paper attended two teaching workshops to improve teaching. In the first workshop "Engineering Engineering Education: A Catalyst for Change". ⁽¹²⁾ he was able to gain an ability to redesign his courses such that students become more active, found effective ways to engage students in interacting with each other, developed a better understanding of teamwork and how it works best, and learned about new assessment tools especially assessing team performance. In the other teaching workshop (ExCEED Teaching Workshop) the junior faculty gained skills that allowed him to improve ways of communicating with his students, develop interpersonal relationships with his students, learn about new methods that get students to become more active in the class, and find effective ways to prepare and present class lectures. ⁽¹³⁾

Finley ⁽¹⁴⁾ gave the following list of tips or recommendations for success in a tenure track position:

- Teach/Mentor Well
- Publish—teaching pedagogy
- Build “bridges” with colleagues in academia and industry
- Be active in ASEE/other professional societies
- Stay out of politics
- Toot your own horn with press releases
- Learn to say “no”
- Put a lock on the door and use it
- Live close to campus (save commute time)
- Employ undergraduate work study students
- Choose activities wisely—“get the biggest bang for your buck”
- Be kind (courteous, flexible, fair, outgoing, personable, friendly)

Goal setting can help achieve the balance between work and personal life. ⁽⁸⁾ Goals should be developed for the long-term with intermediate goals being developed for the year or academic term. Once goals are set, then priorities need to be established to ensure that those goals are accomplished.

Become efficient in teaching, as well as professional development and service. ⁽⁸⁾ Efficient preparation of classroom instruction leads to better student/teacher relations, makes the professor feel better, and provides much needed time for the myriad of tasks that must be accomplished. Efficiency in research, meetings, coffee breaks, and every aspect of the day is necessary. Efficient work habits make the day seem like it has 26 hours, a situation that is the dream of many scholars. Efficiency, once in place, can have a positive effect on one’s personal life in the same way as it will in the office. Efficiency, like priorities, helps to remove stress. ⁽⁸⁾

Conclusions

There are many unique opportunities in a visiting position that make it worthy of consideration by a faculty member planning to pursue a career in the tenure stream. The transition from a visiting position to tenure-track position is a process. For this process to succeed, it requires time management and efforts including a plan that starts during the visiting position period. Taking advantage of the opportunities available in visiting positions can help a faculty member in the tenure stream get off to a good and quick start.

Many factors have been identified to help a faculty member get tenured. A plan with a viable schedule that will satisfy expectations as well as participation in an effective mentoring program are keys to getting tenure. There is life before, during, and after tenure. Setting goals, establishing priorities, and efficiency can help achieve a balance between work and personal life.

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