

Getting a Good Start on Tenure the First Year

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Abstract:

Six years to tenure seems like an eternity until the last year approaches and much is yet to be accomplished. A sudden surge of activity at the end of the tenure trek is “normal”, as most new professors spend too much time getting started. This is especially so when there is a research program that must be established before the refereed papers can be produced. And, of course there is the teaching aspect of tenure. In teaching colleges the path is different but requires planning and careful management just as it does in the research institutions. The key to success is a fast start that eliminates the first year syndrome, where satisfaction over landing a job buoys the new professor until the realization hits that this is a small step in a lifetime career.

This paper addresses the fast start from three levels; Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA), Director of Engineering Technology, and the new Professor. It addresses the plan proposed by the VPAA, the execution of that plan by the Director, and the efforts of the Professor to accomplish the myriad of tasks that will help in the tenure process. It involves direct communication among the group, and a mentoring plan to assist the new Professor. It requires each responsible agent to get involved to assist in the success of the program. It is not an assurance of success, but it helps all parties begin the evaluative process early, to avoid disasters that deny tenure to good people and tenure some who might otherwise be less qualified.

Introduction:

The long and tiring process of hiring or being hired as a new professor is the first step in a life time career. All parties are relieved that the process is over and that the organization can once again come to a steady-state. Unfortunately, it is all too often that those who did the hiring fail to provide further guidance to the fledgling professor. It is left to the new professor to “prove” their worth, to earn tenure. This approach leads to many failed tenure cases when the candidate was considered excellent by the faculty all through the process. This apparent lack of support is a concern to all new faculty, and to many experienced faculty who find bright young talent cast aside for reasons unknown.

In his paper, “Making a Place for the New American Scholar”, R. Eugene Rice¹ explains the evolution of the “American Scholar”. This evolution caused research to dominate the tenure decisions as a result of the expansion of universities in the years following World War II. Research and publications, linked closely together, became the measuring stick for tenure decisions. Other criteria were cited, but denial of tenure was inevitably based on the level of peer review and prominence of the publication media. The paper goes on to note that today’s new professors are “caught between the times” when research and publications were paramount, and the need to emphasize teaching is growing. Thus, new professors are now expected to do both, and do them well. And who are the judges? They are generally professors who survived the radical changes of the 60’s and 70’s, changes that saw publication as the only measure of success.

Ernest Boyer’s work, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*² became prominent as the 90’s began, just when universities were looking at the role of teaching and

pedagogy in the scholarly domain. Coincidentally, the timing concurred with the reduction of government research funds and legislative review of tenure in several states. The work provides challenging, intellectual scholarship applicable at all universities, based primarily on mission. Best said by Rice, “What is needed are new ideas, fresh conceptions of faculty work, ones that reunite institutional and personal endeavor and bring wholeness to scholarly lives.” He sums up the impact of Boyer’s work as follows: “*Scholarship Reconsidered* was a catalyst that unleashed a serious endeavor to develop new models for evaluating and rewarding faculty work, models more appropriate to the complex missions of the metropolitan universities.”

In examining the needs for the future, Rice is concerned that academe attract the best new professors. He states that, “We need careers that will be more resilient and self-rewarding for individual faculty, but ones that are also aligned with the central missions of our colleges and universities, enabling our institutions to lead in a society where the priorities and needs are changing in an environment of growing constraints.” As universities change their mission, they must realize that the execution of that mission is through the faculty, and that without faculty support, the mission, and consequently the university, will fail.

In their books, Wankat and Oreovicz³, and Reis⁴ discuss the elements of success in preparing for a full career as a university professor. In Wankat and Oreovicz’ book dedicated to teaching, tenure receives a small, almost cursory glance. It is evident however, that research is high on the success list and teaching and student evaluations of lower importance based on national faculty surveys. In Reis’ book, some additional time is spent on tenure, and again, there is a sense of caution when dealing in the area of tenure: an inexact science.

Fast Start:

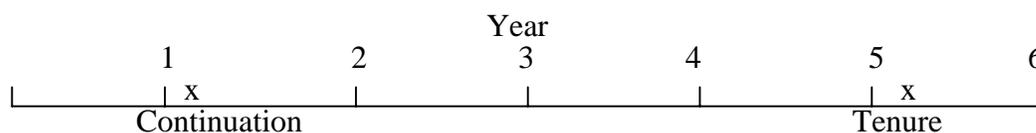
Being an all undergraduate arm of the University of Pittsburgh, the Johnstown regional campus developed its own vision and mission statements based on undergraduate education. Tenure is recommended through the normal chain of faculty committees, department, division, and faculty status committee. Recommendations are forwarded to the Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA) and then to the President. Formal approval of all actions recommended by the President rests in the Office of the Provost on the main campus. The university has specific guidelines for tenure actions, but realizes that each entity within the university has distinct missions. Reflection of that mission in the requirements for tenure indicates a progressive pattern of development, not unlike that outlined by Boyer, and emphasized by Rice. Based on this pattern, the VPAA, the Division Directors, and the new Assistant Professors are able to chart a course for success. The course does not imply automatic success, rather it is a path, which if followed, provides the university with mission support while affording the faculty member the best chance for success. Note, the VPAA and the Division Director roughly equate to a Dean and a Department Chair at many universities.

In the following paragraphs, information is provided that describes the “fast start” process put into place to provide ample opportunity for new faculty to succeed in the tenure battle. The premise is that there is no slack time available, that new faculty need to establish their direction early, must be monitored often, and counseled as needed. As mentioned in Reis’ book, one of the professors interviewed stated that she “was never formally observed or evaluated by anyone”, at a university where tenure was denied. “Fast start” eliminates that problem as will become obvious.

Vice President for Academic Affairs

New professors, both tenure and non-tenure track, are required to attend an orientation hosted by the VPAA. Here, the tone of the university is set by the proclamation that: “Our primary function is undergraduate teaching.” Since contracts are initially for three years, with the renewal

process beginning in the fall of the second year, the importance of a fast start is emphasized. The x's on the time line below indicate the times when dossiers are needed for decisions on continuance and tenure.



With the continuance dossier needed early in the second year, it is imperative that something happen in the first year to indicate the probability of success. Likewise, there needs to be significant effort expended to ensure that by year five, a pattern of success has been established to allow the faculty committees to recommend that tenure be granted. Further, the case needs to be sufficiently strong to provide the President a strong position when presenting the case to the Provost.

The VPAA continues with an outline of the activities that will provide a strong case. Essentially, there are three areas of performance that are measured, each with modifying comments listed below:

Performance Measures →	Teaching Effectiveness	Professional Development	Community/University Service
→	Evaluation by a faculty mentor.	Outline or agenda tied to successful efforts.	Advising.
Evaluation metrics →	Indications of opinions by unqualified peers (student ratings).	Peer reviewed work that supports the discipline or the pedagogy of the discipline.	Committees within the department, division, or the university.
→	Peer Review Committee.	Seminal works, although this is to be avoided if possible before tenure.	Service to professional organizations.

It is not necessary to do everything, but it is important to be an excellent teacher, and to be able to prove it, and there must be a program of professional development.

This orientation by the VPAA is short, two to three hours, and serves as notice to the new professors not to let the grass grow under their feet. It is an open exchange where there are no secrets, no attempt to deceive, and every attempt to foster success. Clearly, this is an atmosphere of success that can be carried forward if the new professors heed the advice. The briefing has been the same for two consecutive years and has been well received on both occasions.

Division Director

The next step in the process is the development of a plan and the execution of the same; the responsibility of the Division Director in concert with the new professor. The first priority in the undergraduate teaching university is determining the suitability of the new professor in the classroom. The plan cannot be developed without an assessment of the in-class presentation by the new professor. If this area seems to be satisfactory, development of teaching skills can be on an as-needed basis. If the teaching is poor, it is imperative that a developmental program be prescribed or the faculty member will fail. It is recommended that two experienced faculty within the discipline provide peer reviews, unless there is a faculty development person available to perform an outside assessment. In that case, one visit from a discipline specific faculty member is necessary to ensure technical knowledge is adequate. Even in research-oriented

universities, the evaluation of teaching is of importance, although it is often overlooked if the research efforts are superior. What a tragedy for the students.

Once teaching is evaluated, a plan must be established to ensure that the new faculty member has a first year filled with activity. There should be some time allowed for development of new courses, preparing syllabi for courses that are new to the professor, plans for starting research and publication of dissertation material or pedagogy, and a timeline for success in coming years. Specifics should include the desired number of research projects, probable grants, consulting that supports the discipline and fosters knowledge that is applicable in the classroom, publications, new courses to be developed, and precise event timing. A viable schedule is imperative, or the venture will fail.

Finally, there must be a mentor to act as an agent for the new faculty member. If the faculty member is a good teacher and is technically competent, the sink or swim process does not serve the university or the faculty well. The mentor should take every opportunity to encourage, assist, cajole, and provide guidance as the new faculty member begins the journey to tenure. The mentor can peer review classes, provide guidance on research grants, introduce the faculty member to companies that support the program, and ascertain the progress of the new professor to ensure progress is being made. The most important role of the mentor is to ensure that the new professor is doing their part.

New Professor

The best manager of one's career is one's self. Getting tenure is no different; it is the responsibility of the new professor to achieve the standards necessary to obtain tenure. With the help of the VPAA's briefing and a Division Director establishing a program in concert with the new professor, identifying the elements critical to success is left to the new professor. The six most important steps as viewed by a new faculty member are:

- Read any and all tenure documents to understand the expectations of the university.
- Develop a plan and discuss it with the department chair, obtain feedback, and amend as necessary.
- Set a schedule that will satisfy expectations for high priority items:
 - Papers to write.
 - Grant proposals to submit.
 - Classes to teach.
 - Seminars and paper presentations at conferences.
- Keep a continuous log of activities, checking frequently to ensure they support the schedule and the university mission. Update activities as needed.
- Create a file with all paperwork normally contained in the tenure dossier.
 - Classes taught.
 - Syllabi.
 - Handouts.
 - Test and quizzes.
 - Student evaluations.
 - Grand proposals submitted and the resulting action.
 - Papers submitted and accepted.
 - Seminars and papers given.

- Carefully plan and execute service requirements to ensure adequate participation, but be careful not to become overextended.

The message has been well received and translated into a tenure plan. Based on the new professor's list, all parties are in sync. This allows for easy discussion of the plan and coordinated execution of the same. A sample of the plan is this paper which was spawned from the original meetings at the beginning of the term. The immediacy of the synergy provided a "fast start": one that will enable the new professor to reach the desired goals if expenditure of effort remains at this high level.

Conclusions:

Faculty careers have been structured based on the institutional needs. Faculty are given enough information to develop a path to success and are encouraged to follow that path to its successful conclusion. There is no perfect path, no sure path, but there is a path that allows for success. The availability of information and mentoring provides guidance throughout the tenure process, and allows for constant evaluation of the new faculty member. The process is a win-win proposition that results in adequate information for all parties at the decision point.

References:

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3. Wankat, P.C., and Oreovicz, F.S., *Teaching Engineering*, McGraw-Hill, Inc, New York, 1993.
4. Reis, Richard M., *Tomorrow's Professor, Preparing for Academic Careers in Science and Engineering*, IEEE Press, New York, 1997.

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