

**Tips for beginning faculty in engineering**

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Robert Boice (1992) has done research on the attributes of new faculty members who quickly establish successful careers. These attributes are as follows: faculty members spend quality time on teaching but not quantity time (they do not obsess); spend significant time publishing papers and pursuing grants early in their careers; network three to four hours a week with mentors and colleagues; and spend time on things outside of work other than their jobs. This is an excellent approach!

I compiled this list of tips when I was asked to speak to new faculty at LSU about how to succeed on the tenure track. I have expanded and evolved these tips with the help of many wise people and with the sometimes harsh reality of experience. Though they are geared primarily toward engineering faculty at Research I institutions, I have included information useful for everyone teaching at the college level.

1. **Don't be a perfectionist!!!! The academic career ladder is strewn with the wrecked careers of perfectionists!!!** (see #2 for details).
2. **Live by the 80/20 rule:** you get 80% of a project finished in 20% of the total time it takes to complete that project, but the last 20% of the project takes 80% of the time.

HINT: In academia, you can “80” most things. You will have to, because being on the tenure track is like trying to juggle 100 balls at once when you can really only handle 50.

3. **Keep your mouth shut in faculty meetings until you know the identity of the village idiot and the identity of the respected sage** (every faculty has at least one of each). You want to be aligned with the sage and not the idiot.
  - Corollary: avoid statements like “At My Dissertation University, we did...” unless you are directly asked. Established faculty members tend to dismiss things that happened to you while you were a graduate student.
4. **Figure out the rules of tenure (written and unwritten) as fast as you can...then decide which rules you will play by and which you won't.**
  - If you are not sure of the rules of tenure, ask your chair, the departmental promotion and tenure committee, and your colleagues. You will probably get different answers and you may get vague answers...keep asking until you understand.
  - Use your promotion and tenure committee and your annual evaluations to keep tabs on your progress.
  - Make sure that you are intimately acquainted with your university's written promotion and tenure policies and procedures. When you go up for tenure, there should be no surprises.

With those said, here are a few tenure rules as I understand them:

- Remember that tenure decisions tend to concentrate on what can be counted, for example, numbers of papers, books, or number of grant dollars.
- Remember that a dollar is not a dollar, or like the quote in Animal Farm, all animals are equal but some are more equal than others. Federal dollars are the pinnacle of funding and are one measure used to determine which engineering schools are “best.” Thus, a \$100,000 grant from NSF, DoD, DoE, HUD, or NIH is worth more to your university than a \$100,000 grant from your state Board of Regents or other local/state source. Likewise, it is worth more to your dossier. Federal funding is almost a must for getting tenure in engineering colleges at Research I institutions.
- A (not all, but “a,” as in one) Research I College of Engineering will say (unofficially of course) that to be in “safe” territory regarding promotion and tenure, you should have 1-2 refereed journal articles per year and \$100,000 of funding per year.

5. **Stay positive around and about your colleagues and peers (don’t make enemies).**

- Corollary: Remember that e-mail is not secure.
- Corollary 2: Remember that you can make enemies simply by drawing breath, even if you are positive around and about your colleagues and peers. Jealousy and pettiness are as much a part of the academic landscape as publishing and committees. Luckily the former influences many fewer people than the latter.

6. **Establish a team of mentors and use their wisdom at regular intervals, especially with regard to promotion and tenure issues.**

Try to choose people with whom you interact well and respect. Remember that individual faculty members have different strengths, and it is useful to talk to the resident expert in that particular area. Also try to get mentors from outside your discipline, and even from outside your college. Sometimes these folks can provide a fresh perspective on an issue. Don’t be afraid to ask for advice; remember that faculty love to talk, and it’s always an ego boost to be asked for your opinion.

If you are an academic (especially a woman), the following book will be the best \$14.75 you ever spent: Ms. Mentor’s Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia, by Emily Toth. Here you can learn about the truths and trickeries of the academy through such chapters as the first year on the job, and slouching toward tenure. Ms. Mentor also has a monthly column at <http://www.chronicle.com/jobs> (click on Ms. Mentor under Career Network Library), where you can submit questions and missives involving all facets of academia.

7. **Make use of the resources available to you on campus.** Most campuses have a center for faculty development, in which you can receive excellent information and assistance about things such as teaching, research, writing proposals, establishing multidisciplinary teams, electronic means of receiving requests for proposals, etc.

8. **Make your office your own personal oasis.** According to Gelb (1998), you can improve your mood, creativity, and productivity by enlivening all your senses in your work environment. To create your own “Renaissance Room” or “Creativity Center,” think about the furniture (comfortable, ergonomically correct), the walls (mine are a warm yellow color), lighting, sound (so that you can listen to Mozart, National Public Radio, or a song that a student raves about by a group you’ve never heard of; a small fountain creates a calming sound), aesthetics (paintings, photographs, plants, lava lamps), smell (candles, potpourri, incense), and air quality (air purifier, heater, fan, humidifier or dehumidifier). My students constantly tell me that they feel at home in my office; I reply that I do too, and I’d better, since I spend more time in my office than in any other room in my life!
9. **Block out time for writing every week, and treat this time with as much reverence as you would a meeting with the chancellor.**

In order to get tenure, you must publish your work in refereed journals. Try to adopt strategies to encourage yourself to write continually. For example: “Resolve to write one lousy page a day,” or “Make sure that you always have at least one publication in process (in review or in press).”

10. **SAY NO! Revel in saying no.** If you are good (and willing), you will quickly be overloaded with committees and meetings. Remember that refereed journal articles and grant money will get you tenure and not much else. When you choose committee work, try to pick high profile (state, national), low intensity work that you’re interested in, or very short term, low time, low energy commitments that look good on a vita. If you are an assistant professor, don’t be a graduate coordinator or undergraduate coordinator (time sink), and don’t be on a controversial committee (where you could make decisions that might alienate people).
11. **Make friends with rejection (papers, proposals) and feeling overwhelmed.** About 10% of federal grants are funded (the percentage is even lower for your first submission, so if you’re rejected, revise according to reviewer comments and re-submit!), and state Board of Regents funding rates can be anywhere from 5% to almost 100%. Remember that there is a difference between a critical review and a BAD review (the latter occurs when the reviewer takes personal shots to bolster his/her own ego). Ignore the bad ones, heed the critical ones, and remember that everyone goes through this. 😊
12. **There is some room within the tenure system such that you can work the system to your strengths.** For example, in academia, “a career built on teaching is a career built on sand” (Toth, 1998). However, if you make teaching a scholarly activity by publishing refereed papers (in the Journal of Engineering Education for example) and receiving grant money for teaching research, you’re on more solid ground.
13. **Guard your time like a donkey guards a chicken coop!** Your most precious commodity as a faculty member is your time, and your objective is to maximize the

time you spend doing the things that will get you tenure. While tips 9, 10, 14 and 15 say this in different ways, the concept bears explicit and vigorous repetition! Delegate as much as you can to your office staff, graduate students, and student workers. These folks can take care of things like ordering equipment, faxing and copying, inventory, grading homework, packaging, and sending off recommendation letters and proposals, etc. Be available to your students during office hours, but not all the time. Guard your time.

14. **Don't put your life on hold until after tenure.** Most tenured faculty have said that the work habits that one establishes pre-tenure won't change in one's post tenure years (That's not 100% true, but the sentiment is still a good one). Take regular vacations; mental health days count as sick days; stop and smell the roses; take up a hobby (see #15 and #16).
15. **Keep your life balanced!** Academia can easily take all your time and will if you let it. Have a life outside of work. There are many strategies for handling this. Some people rarely bring work home so that their home lives are not "contaminated" by their work lives. Others work a set number of hours per week (45, for example) and stop when they hit this limit. Still others set aside times during the week that are always, absolutely their own (devoted to self, spouse, family, friends, etc.).
16. **Make a list of all the things you do to relax. Place this list in a prominent place in your office AND in your house. Regularly do things on the list. ADD FIVE ITEMS that you might be interested in or always thought you might like to do...and do them too.**

Here's a list of hobbies that folks I've known have taken up: acting, archery, bird watching, clowning, dancing, gardening, joining a game club, reading trash novels, regular trips to nature, recreational sports leagues, running marathons, photography, sign language, triathlons, walking, yoga.

***Remember that the first five to six years of a tenure track career are the hardest and most time intensive.***

**GOOD LUCK!**

## **References**

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