

ADVICE

How to Be Strategic on the Tenure Track

By *Manya Whitaker* | NOVEMBER 21, 2018



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A friend and fellow tenure-track professor was recently describing how busy he's been in the past four months — giving talks around the country, finalizing a book manuscript, attending workshops, teaching two new courses. Now, he is mulling whether to add to that load by taking on the directorship of a new academic program. Why, I asked, why he was doing so much? "I'm getting ready for tenure," he

replied.

The matter-of-fact way in which he answered drove home the precarious nature of academic employment and the increasingly high bar to earn tenure.

My graduate adviser got tenure in the early 1970s after only three years as an assistant professor and with just two publications. Today, some Research I universities award tenure in the sciences only if you've published six to eight articles a year, or in the humanities, two books within six or seven years (one of which must "change the field"). Those tenure standards are very difficult to meet, even with a minimal teaching schedule, a sizable amount of grant dollars, and a troop of graduate students. Even at teaching-oriented institutions, the requirements for promotion are much more formidable than they used to be. But meet them you must, if you want to keep working in academe.

So how do you resist overworking when, in many instances, that is the only path to tenure?

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The pressure to work long hours is certainly not unique to faculty members, nor is it limited to higher education. After a generation of high-stakes testing in schools, our society may finally be ready to admit that four hours of sleep followed by seven hours in school, three hours of extracurriculars, and another three hours

of homework are the likely causes of record-high rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide among adolescents.

In fact, there is a movement among some parents to lower kids' stress levels — to opt out of testing, to limit extracurriculars, to lay off on the pressure to apply to top-tier colleges. And some colleges have acknowledged their role in creating this hypercompetitive educational culture and no longer rely on standardized test scores and AP or IB credit for college admissions. For example, Harvard now also looks for evidence of creativity in applicants' materials, Trinity College advertises an approach to admissions that aims to "get to know you for who you really are," and MIT wants initiative, risk-taking, and curiosity in its students.

Why can't we do that in the academic workplace? Why can't institutions opt out of the high-stakes tenure model? Or at least create more wholistic tenure requirements that include an evaluation of people rather than their products?

That's unlikely to happen any time soon. So what can you as an early-career scholar do in the meantime — I mean, other than work yourself into a frenzy? Much like 21st-century teenagers, you have to start being more strategic about what you do to get "accepted" into academe.

Relationship-building. We sometimes forget that tenure-and-promotion reviews are conducted by our peers — not by some unbiased omniscient higher being. The downside there: A fair and all-knowing higher being would already know how hard you've worked, how many trials you've overcome, or how contextual factors may have affected your ability to perform at optimal levels. There is no way for a tenure committee to know all of that on its own.

And a committee of fallible people, by definition, means you can expect the ever-present and unfortunate concept of bias to play a role in your tenure review. The upside there: With a little advance groundwork, the opportunity to inject a little humanity into the tenure process can work to your advantage. Any relationships you've built with members of the committee can help them understand your record better. The more shortcuts you can give the tenure committee to process information about you, the better.

What I mean is that you never want your file to be in front of someone who has never heard of you and, thus, must rely solely on the "objective" content of your dossier. But if the committee members have interacted with you in multiple contexts over the past six years, they can use their personal knowledge of you to contextualize your file.

2-Minute Tips:

Produced by Carmen Mendoza and Julia Schmalz

There are ways to further your quest for tenure without overworking. Watch this 2-minute tip video.

Of course if they've had negative encounters with you, or if you have a bad reputation, that can certainly hurt your tenure prospects. So as soon as you begin your tenure-track position, foster relationships with people from across the campus. You don't have to be friends with all of them — just make sure you are collegial and professional during meetings, hallway chats, and obligatory social events.

Research. Many pretenure faculty make two mistakes as they build their research portfolio:

- They believe that all research activity counts equally toward tenure.
- They think quantity is more important than quality.

The first error prompts many junior scholars to attend multiple conferences every year, give talks, and expend a lot of effort doing things that don't "count" in their field. As a new assistant professor, you need to understand the difference between "scholarly productivity" (the tangible outcomes of your research: books, articles, reports, performances, etc.) and "scholarly activity" (the opportunities that grow out of your research: conference presentations, talks, invitations to serve as a reviewer or board member). While both demonstrate your scholarly engagement, the products are what most committees look for when evaluating your research for tenure.

That leads to the second mistake. Having six articles is not necessarily better than having three if the six articles are in mediocre or low-tier journals, and the three are in top-tier ones. Publishing three books in six years might be commendable — but not if no one has heard of the publisher or if your book isn't taken seriously by other scholars in the field.

In short, more is not always better. Be clear about the balance between number, publication venue, and impact when it comes to research requirements for tenure in your department.

Teaching. Many assistant professors receive a reduced teaching load in the first year or two of a tenure-track position. After that, you are expected to teach a full course load, including at least one service course (e.g., an introductory course) for the department. But by the time you come up for tenure, you should have demonstrated competency in teaching different types of courses.

If you're given some choice over what you'll teach in your first few years, don't jump straight to senior seminars, simply because the classes are smaller and the students more serious. Think about gaps in the curriculum and create a course that enhances the department's

overall portfolio and might attract new students to the department. You should also consider teaching courses that serve collegewide requirements — first-year seminars, writing courses, or gen-ed classes.

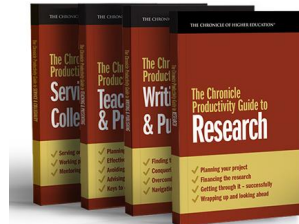
Finally, consider teaching with someone from a different discipline if possible. Co-teaching is indeed more work than teaching alone, but it has the double benefit of allowing you to observe someone else teach while also fostering relationships with faculty members in other disciplines. Senior members of your department are often the first, but not only, people to review your tenure file. You must also convince colleagues from across campus that you are valuable beyond your department.

Service. Service is where you may make the most mistakes in managing your time and responsibilities on the tenure track, because you may feel as though you have to say yes to all requests. After all, you're excited to be on the tenure track, so of course you want to say yes when asked. Women, and especially women of color, do almost 1.5 times the amount of service as men, particularly when it comes to student mentoring. (Who can say no to earnest, enthusiastic students?)

It's all too easy to take on too much service. As a junior scholar anxious to make a mark on your field, you may end up serving as a journal reviewer or a committee chair of a national organization. Because you still vividly recall your own traumatic experiences in graduate school, you may agree to mentor graduate students who aren't even at your current institution. Then, to top it off, your committee assignments are often mundane because you are being "protected" from too much service work.

In figuring out your service load, it's probably best for assistant professors to do more service on a serious committee and limit (or forgo entirely) the amount of extra service you do off campus. Senior faculty members are on the campus governance, budget, and curriculum committees because they are important jobs that are delegated to trustworthy, thoughtful people. If possible, request an assignment on a committee that makes decisions that matter. Such a role can give you an inside view of how your institution functions and help you develop those all-important relationships with senior professors who may end up evaluating your tenure file.

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Be intentional. You need to be pragmatic and careful about how you use your time and energy on the tenure track. The fear of tenure denial looms above every assistant professor, but letting that fear push you to the brink of mental and physical well-being is not only terrible for you but will not necessarily lead to your promotion.

Every year on the tenure track, instead of doing a lot of little things that in the end may not matter, do two big things. Publish in the top journal or with a reputable press in your field. Get a grant. Create a new course. Serve on an important committee. And always, always be building relationships.

Remember: Tenure evaluations are about how well you did what you were expected to do. Leave the stuff you want to do until *after* you have tenure.

Manya Whitaker is an assistant professor of education at Colorado College who writes regularly for The Chronicle about early-career issues in academe. Read her previous columns here.

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