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Tenure: How To Get It

Holding the demands of our work and personal lives in tension

By James L. Wiser

In an era when there are increasing demands for measurable indicators of faculty productivity and heightened concerns regarding costs and accessibility the institution of tenure is under severe scrutiny.

The traditional criticisms of tenure are well known. These include the process's tendency to value research over teaching and tenure's utility in protecting poor performance. In addition by "locking in" individuals with specific skill sets and interests tenure promotes a culture of institutional conservatism which makes fundamental reform difficult. This, in turn, limits an institution's ability both to respond to new expectations from the market place and to incorporate recent scholarly and professional advances.

The traditional rationale for tenure is also well known. It is designed to protect the academic freedom of each professor and to promote the institutional autonomy of the professoriate. In addition, by providing for relative job security, tenure adds to the attractiveness of a profession whose compensation structure alone

may be otherwise inadequate to recruit and retain the most gifted into its ranks.

II

Whatever the future of tenure may be, the current situation at our Jesuit schools is that a significant number are on tenure-track. The issues they face are numerous and varied but perhaps can be summarized in general as a *search for balance* - a search with at least three dimensions.

First, *faculty responsibilities* typically include teaching, research, and service. Although one may (and ideally will) inform the other, fulfilling these duties requires both time and energy and each of which is limited. Given this, the challenge is to strike a balance in the effort devoted to teaching, research, and service. To a certain degree a faculty member's interests will inform this determination, but ultimately it is the institution's

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own understanding of its mission which will decide the issue. As a consequence, tenure-track faculty need to know the standards by which they will be judged. Faculty must master their faculty handbooks. How much weight is given to the various responsibilities and how one's performance in each area is assessed can vary greatly from school to school. Given this, it is not advisable to rely upon either one's previous experience or a tacit understanding of the rules. From the very beginning of their appointments tenure-track faculty need to know the rules in play at their own institutions and to consult with those who have an understanding of how these rules have been used in the past.

Second, *faculty are simultaneously members of several different communities*. Two of the most important of these are the university or *college* community which employs them and the *disciplinary* community constituted by the scholarly professionals in their field. For example, I am member both of the University of San Francisco and of the scholarly community of professional political scientists. Each of these communities has expectations of me, establishes standards by which my work is evaluated, and is in a position to recognize and support my efforts. Each expects me to contribute to its mission and to assist in the pursuit of its goals. Each has a call upon my time, energy, and loyalty. Once again then, the challenge is to strike a proper balance between these calls. This is a challenge which will continue throughout one's professional career.

What is considered the proper balance will differ from college to college and discipline to discipline. It will also depend upon the career stage of the individual faculty member. What is the appropriate balance for a newly hired professor may not be the same as that for a more experienced colleague. In my experience there is a tendency for the newest faculty to emphasize their professional associations at the expense of their institutional homes and for the more experienced professors to do the opposite. In each case it is important to avoid the extreme.

Third, all who work are faced with the challenge of *finding a proper balance between their professional and personal lives*. Our work can all too easily become all-consuming. Given the individual nature of the particular situations in which each of us concretely lives, it is difficult for me to offer general advice – except to suggest that we should make the effort to consciously hold the demands of our work and personal lives in tension. It is too easy to let the immediate situation or the urgent tasks at hand determine our actions and priorities. Although we must respond to the challenges of the moment, our responses are best if informed by an awareness of that tension introduced by our desire to live a meaningful and fully human life. I don't believe there is a general formula for maintaining this awareness but I hope that by working at a Jesuit institution we are provided with an environment which encourages us to do so.

III

Finally, I have been asked if I can offer any practical advice for “walking the tightrope” of the tenure track. Allow me to suggest four items.

- 1) *Remember your audience*. As you prepare your materials for promotion and tenure remember that once your application moves beyond the department and is being reviewed by college and university committees you cannot assume that there will be members from your scholarly discipline on these committees. You will need to explain – without jargon – the meaning and significance of your work. For example, your colleagues may not know which journals in your field are double-blind peer reviewed, which conferences are international, national, or local in scope, or how co-authorship is regarded in your discipline. You will need to be explicit about what constitutes excellent teaching in your field and how it is assessed by your peers. You will need to explain the significance of your service and not just give the names of the various committees on which you have served. You cannot assume that your colleagues from other departments or schools will know these details.
- 2) *Document/document/document*. From day one you should be collecting and saving documentation which records your achievements. You can always weed what you have saved at the appropriate time, but it is almost impossible to recreate that which you need 3 or 4 years after the fact. In other words *you should be building your case for tenure and promotion from the first day of your appointment* and not be waiting to do so during the year in which your materials are due.
- 3) *Establish a research program*. Your colleagues will be asked to assess your research productivity and promise. Determining one's promise is easier if there is a pattern and finding a pattern is easier if there is a program. Your colleagues will be looking for a research program upon which you can build in the future – not for a collection of unrelated, disparate research efforts. Avoid the temptation to jump at all available opportunities by imposing the discipline of a program upon your research agenda.
- 4) On an on-going basis *ask your chair and/or dean to give you regular feedback* regarding your progress towards tenure and promotion. If you have annual evaluations, use the occasion to ask your supervisor to look beyond the year and give you a reading as to your general progress towards tenure. There should be no surprises when the tenure decision is announced. ■