


ARTICLE

10 Things No One Told Me About Applying for Tenure

By *Manya Whitaker* | APRIL 28, 2019



This semester brought the good news that I was granted tenure and promoted to associate professor. Ever since, people keep asking, "How does it feel?!" My answer is always, "It feels the same." Then I quickly add, "Because applying for tenure was the emotional part."

Like almost every other assistant professor whose academic career is on the chopping block, my emotions ran the gamut. I was excited, nervous, afraid, proud, confused. But what I recall most clearly are the moments when I said to myself, "Nobody told me this."

Here, now, I share 10 things nobody told me about going up for tenure. The process surely varies by field and institution. But I hope this may help eliminate at least some of the surprises for you when the time comes.

No. 1: Keep records of everything from Day 1 of your tenure-track job. And I do mean everything:

- At the end of each course you teach, read your evaluations, summarize them in a few bullet points, and store your summary in a folder with the course and year clearly indicated.
- Do the same thing for your record of service, both formal and informal.
- Record your advising loads, mentoring work, participation in search committees, and journals for which you've written peer reviews.

- Create research plans every semester that clearly indicate your primary research questions and/or goals. Make notes on what you accomplished, and didn't, each semester and why you may not have met your goals. If you publish an article, note the journal's impact factor. If you've published a chapter or a book, summarize the press's reputation in your field.

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You will draw on all of that information when it comes time to write your tenure statements. Without such organized files, I spent dozens of hours combing through old emails, searching the websites of various journals, locating my previous annual reports, and hoping that digital content from my earlier courses was archived.

No. 2: Start planning your dossier two years before it is due. I began to assemble my tenure file only six months before its October due date. Usually that would be enough time to write three statements, but I also had to schedule teaching observations and submit a list of external reviewers before the end of the year. It proved a lot to juggle during the fall semester.

You will thank your past self if you have clear outlines for your various tenure statements as well as a list of possible external reviewers and a general sense of how much work you have to do to get your file ready for submission. A big portion of the anxiety of applying for tenure is about having yet another important task on your ever-growing to-do list — a task that you may not have the mental capacity to do correctly given everything else that is going on.

No. 3: The entire dossier should tell a coherent story. What that means: Your teaching statement should be related to your research statement, which should be underscored by your service statement.

When I asked a friend who was also seeking tenure to read my three statements, he said they were too choppy and seemed to have been written chronologically instead of thematically. (They were.) That was the best feedback I could have gotten, because it forced me to start over with the same guiding question: How does my work in this area reflect my professional identity? As I wrote the new drafts, I felt assured that I was telling a story with a unifying theme of educational equity and opportunity, which captured my professional interests and expertise.

The tenure committee wants to get a holistic sense of who you are professionally. What about you emerges from all aspects of your work? People should be able to read your service statement, for example, and make a pretty accurate guess about your research agenda. Reiterate your professional interests and expertise in every document.

No. 4: It's really hard to characterize the impact of your research. I knew I would have to describe the impact of my work, but I wasn't prepared for how tricky that proved to be. Most tenure candidates rely on the traditional metrics — impact factors, citation count, conference presentations, invited lectures — to relay the significance of their work.

While those numbers are important for the committee to know, you should also give a qualitative description of how your work contributes to thinking in the field. What gaps are you filling in the discipline's canon? How many other people are doing similar research? What might happen if society followed your research suggestions?

In essence: Don't just give the committee your stats on ResearchGate; show how your work has the potential to effect change in the discipline.

No. 5: Service matters more than people say it does. This is especially true at liberal-arts colleges like mine, but faculty members at research-oriented institutions have told me that service is not a throwaway there, either. It's not enough to sit on a committee or two. You should also be involved in your discipline and/or in the local area. As assistant

professors, almost all of us are told to limit our service and focus on the research we need to do to earn tenure. And certainly at most four-year institutions, research matters more than service when it comes to earning tenure.

Just don't assume that service doesn't matter at all. Doing the bare minimum never looks good on any aspect of your tenure file. So it's wise to have at least one other area in which you serve. It could be advising a student group on campus, being a journal and conference reviewer, sitting on the board of a local nonprofit agency, or assuming a leadership role in your discipline's major organization. Whatever you choose, it should be something you genuinely enjoy doing, so that you can write about it as an authentic part of your professional development.

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In my tenure meeting with the dean, she shared the official letter that summarized key aspects of my file. I was surprised to see how much emphasis there was on my service, particularly from people on my campus, including students, who had submitted letters on my behalf. It wasn't until that moment that I realized if I had not agreed to advise those student groups, or participate in an external review, or help plan those events,

many people would not have had much to say about me in their letters. Service, though time-consuming and exhausting, is how you make the connections that facilitate campuswide support of your tenure.

No. 6: Teaching matters. This is obvious at liberal-arts colleges and teaching-oriented universities, where faculty members have heavy teaching loads, but is often understated at research-oriented institutions. I did my undergraduate and graduate work at R1s and rarely heard my advisers even mention their own teaching. In graduate school, when I asked to teach a section of developmental psychology, the graduate director asked me why I would "waste" my time on teaching.

Many recent Ph.D.s begin a tenure-track job thinking that teaching is less important than it is (which is what I would have thought had I not accepted a position at a liberal-arts college). That misconception is furthered by opportunities for professional development and mentorship that are focused almost solely on publishing or perishing.

Here is what you need to keep in mind: Teaching alone may not earn you tenure, especially at research universities, but it can certainly be the reason an institution denies you tenure. Teaching is one of the three pillars of the profession, and if your course evaluations and teaching statement show you are not taking it seriously, the committee has no choice but to count that against you.

No. 7: Other people's advice about your tenure file isn't always helpful. You should have at least two people — a tenured professor at your institution and another at a peer campus — read over your documents before you submit them. But I am not a strong advocate of reading other people's materials as a template for your own.

I learned this the hard way after accumulating five sets of tenure statements from successful professors on my campus and elsewhere. I knew as I was reading them that their style, tone, and even points of emphasis were not to my liking. But those folks had received tenure. Who was I to say that their statements were no good?

So of the five, I picked the one whose research was most similar to my own (which is to say, not similar at all), and used that professor's research statement in her tenure file as a template for my own. After three unsuccessful drafts, I set them aside and dug out my own research statement from my third-year review, and used that as a starting point.

New to Tenure

Wasting time trying to mimic other statements taught me the importance of telling your story in your dossier. Trying to fit your experiences into someone else's narrative will inevitably lead to a weak statement. Not to mention that different institutions are looking for different things. Just because your friend got tenure at Princeton does not make her tenure materials the gold standard. Use the tenure-and-promotion guidelines from your own department/institution to structure your writing, and then send both your statements and your guidelines to a few supportive colleagues for input and proofreading.

No. 8: The process is not as confidential as advertised. Tenure and promotion are decided upon by a group of humans, and humans love to gossip. We especially love to gossip under the guise of giving advice.

Once the dean sent out a campus email soliciting letters for this year's tenure-and-promotion candidates, random people were happy to share tidbits of "guidance" when they saw me. But what they were really doing is warning me not to do what so-and-so did because "you know how that ended up." I heard anecdote after anecdote about why Professor X was denied tenure and how Professor Y got tenure but didn't deserve it.

Once I received tenure, external reviewers outed themselves at conferences by saying things like "I really enjoyed reading your file!" While the positive feedback is wonderful, I am concerned that I will one day be part of someone's well-intentioned advice, too.

No. 9: Meeting the standards may not be enough. Across higher education, the number of tenure-track openings is dwindling as expectations for tenure are rising. To get hired as an assistant professor on the tenure track these days, institutions want you to be first author on multiple publications during graduate school. Five years later, they want you to have published five or six articles a year, or the humanities equivalent of writing at least two books.

Know your institution's standards for teaching, research, and service, and aim to exceed them by 25 percent or more. If multiple people in your department are going up for tenure at the same time, it is crucial that you stand out in a positive way.

I was fortunate to have exceeded my departmental and institutional expectations, although I wasn't purposely trying to publish 25 percent more than expected. Someone in my tenure cohort did not get tenure, however, in part because that person had met only "minimum standards" in an "impressive field." I left no room for such a critique, and I suggest that you don't, either.

No. 10: A tenure dossier, it turns out, sets the stage for promotion to full professor. A tenure file is where you define and describe who you are as an academic. It's where you make clear your professional priorities and what you've done to accomplish your goals. But it is also where you prepare for the next phase of your professional life.

Because you don't know where life might take you, you want your tenure file to leave you enough wiggle room to grow into someone you never imagined you might become. So don't just describe the courses you've already taught and how they contribute to the department's and college's curriculum — spend some of your teaching statement discussing courses you'd like to develop. Similarly, in your research statement, give clues to next steps that logically flow from your current work but might diverge into new territory.

You want to give yourself room to spread out so that, in six years, it looks as if you'd always planned it this way.

Most of all, stay true to yourself. Compiling a tenure file is an incredible exercise in self-reflection. It forces you to confront who you are, what you've done, and to reimagine who you want to become. It is, by far, the most influential and emotional experience I've had in academe. It's a beautiful opportunity to tell your story. I'm grateful that mine had a happy ending.

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