

Tips for First-time Faculty

Advice for engineering department novices

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Robert Boice has done research on the attributes of new faculty members who quickly establish successful careers. The following was noted: successful faculty members spend quality time on teaching, 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!

This list was developed from the collective wisdom of many, especially Emily Toth. These tips are intended to help those getting started on the tenure track in biological and agricultural engineering.

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 percent of a project finished in 20 percent of the total time it takes to complete that project, but the last 20 percent of the project takes 80 percent of the time.

Hint: In academia, you can "80" most things. You will have to. Being on the tenure track is like trying to maintain 100 head of cattle 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.

Logistical issues covered, here are a few tenure rules:

- Remember that tenure decisions tend to concentrate on what can be counted, for example: numbers of refereed journal articles and number of grant dollars received.

- Remember that a dollar is not a dollar, or like the quote in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, "all animals are equal but some are more equal than others." Federal dollars tend to be the pinnacle of funding and are one measure used to determine which engineering schools are "best." Thus, a \$100,000 grant from the USDA, 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. Keep in mind that even though this is true, at your university there may be specific funds with regard to agriculture that will be as important to your colleagues and college as federal funding.

- A (not all, but "a," as in "one") Research I College of Agriculture will say (unofficially, of course) that to be in "safe" territory regarding promotion and tenure, you should have one to two refereed journal articles per year, decent teaching evaluations, and some research funding.

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

- Corollary 1: 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 best \$14.75 you ever spent will be for the following book: *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.”

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 Michael Gelb, 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, 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 or a small fountain that 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. 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 that is very short term, low time, low energy (e.g., 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 ten percent 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.. State Board of Regents funding rates can be anywhere from five percent to almost 100 percent. 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). However, if you make teaching a scholarly activity by publishing refereed papers (in the *NACTA Journal*, 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, maintaining your laboratories, 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 percent 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 while on the tenure track: 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! **R**

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