

Rank and Tenure Advice

Managing the Tenure Track Workshops - April 2023

This advice is presented by the speakers in the Rank and Tenure workshops held in April 2020 - 2023. It is presented in no particular order. Please read all the points and consider them within your own personal context. These are the personal opinions of the presenters and not opinions or policies of any committee, department, college or office of the university.

Given high teaching loads and large numbers of students, it's easy to put research on the backburner since teaching generally tends to be what is most immediately due. It's important to not neglect teaching, but also important to know you have to prioritize your scholarship. Make sure you have dedicated time to accomplish your research goals each morning. Realize that not every lecture has to be perfect and adhere to your office hours, especially when you are establishing your research program.

Turn your email off during the day. I had dedicated times to check my email. Once in the morning and once in the afternoon/evening before I left. It's easy to be in the middle of something and have an administrative task come in or a student inquiry and get distracted. It's very important to respond to both, but you don't have to drop what you're doing to respond immediately, at least in most cases. I also set aside time each week for reading to keep up in my field as well as dedicated times for writing and performing experiments.

Try not to take criticism personally and maintain good mental health. I honestly failed on both of these accounts during my tenure process and spent a lot of time battling depression, especially when it came time to reappointment and progress reports. If I could go back to tell my untenured self something, it's that if you put the work in, the papers will come and carrying stress around about research is not going to make the submission and acceptance process happen any faster. Make sure you leave dedicated time for family and friends and also yourself so the job does not become too overwhelming.

Be a CAT:

1. Be Clear. Explain how your discipline works and why your scholarship is meaningful.
2. Be Anticipatory: Use sufficient space to look to the future in addition to explaining the past. How will having you long term as a colleague benefit SHU/the field?
3. Be Transparent. Collaborative projects are great! But be honest about your role/roles.

Record everything that you do as you do it. You don't want to forget what you did at the start of the tenure track, and it's painful to enter years' worth of missing items into Digital Measures at the end of the tenure track.

Think strategically about who will be on your list of potential external reviewers. These people should be familiar with your work, but you should not have collaborated with them on a project.

Given all of the uncertainty in higher education right now, your goal should be to put together a profile that is worthy of tenure at other universities. That way, if the Seton Hall tenure process doesn't work out for you or if you need a change for personal or professional reasons, you will be in good shape.

Start working on your tenure statement well in advance of the due date. The third-year review is a great time to start drafting statements to help shape the rest of your time on the tenure track and to get feedback from your colleagues.

Pre-tenure: play the long game. Be a good citizen of the University (service). If you're a good teacher, don't just count on that. If you're a productive researcher, don't just count on that. Don't expect long summers on the Riviera (well, maybe one) since you need mail in all those mail slots.

For both: be deadly honest about your accomplishments – puffing up a minor publication or a couple of good student comments always gets punctured in the end. Keep good documentation – always. It doesn't have to be neatly organized: 3 files, 1 each for service, scholarship, and teaching: print out & toss stuff in.

For both: explain, explain, explain. You're not talking to people in your specialty. Often, people in your field might not entirely get what you're doing. Your first audience – your dept. – is by no means your last or maybe even your most important. Otherwise, you're asking several layers throughout the university to simply take the word of your fellow biologists/nursing faculty/social work faculty/educational psychologists. What happens if they don't have the best reputation?

Context is always helpful: “This article synthesizes the prior work on XXX and proposes a new ...”

Create a timeline for achieving tenure during the first year of your appointment and try to stick with it. Decide what committees you'd like to serve on; draw a rough plan of the scholarship you intend to publish; think of whom you'll ask to be an external reviewer. Review your department's guidelines and plan out what and when requirements need to be completed by.

University life is all about collaboration. Serve on the Senate or another university committee and get to know how the university works. Think of being part of a grant proposal put together by senior faculty. Look for ways you can partner with colleagues in other disciplines and departments.

Find out who are on your college and university tenure committees. Faculty in other disciplines may not be familiar with your field and you should be prepared to answer questions about your teaching and scholarship.

Always try to exceed the recommended teaching and research guidelines.

Be a good citizen; be one who builds up the esprit de' corps, but leave heavy service duties to the tenured faculty.

Because the university is investing in you to serve as a model for students and faculty, may tenure be an outcome, not an objective. May it move you to strive for even greater accomplishments

You have 3 audiences: your immediate colleagues who may know more about your work (or may not); your College colleagues who will know less; University colleagues & administrators who will know less. Make no assumptions about your work (teaching, scholarship, service) “standing on its own.” You must explain and contextualize for each audience and all audiences.

Do the legwork on your own scholarship (impact, citations, reviews, selectivity of the outlet, etc.), and do a fair-minded job of it. Early in my career I had an article published in an impressive-sounding journal (The New England Journal of History). It was a decent article (lots of Rider students ran across it for a History course there), but the journal was – and is – small, doesn't have a lot of impact, isn't widely distributed or cited, isn't highly selective. Nothing diminishes a mid-range accomplishment more than trying to puff it up into a major accomplishment. This is incredibly important at the full Professor level.

Show some self-reflection and growth in teaching. It is a craft, after all.

In your interview, do not go on an angry rant against your dean or hand out a point-by-point rebuttal of his/her letter about you. Such behavior makes you look like a neurotic fool. There are other forums in which you can address differences with authority figures.

Do not put everything you ever did since kindergarten in your application. Read and follow the directions on the application form. Padding your application is dishonest and annoying to people who have to sort through it. Such behavior works against you due to reader-fatigue of your application and decision that if you write in such a dishonest way, you are not worthy of tenure or promotion.

Only scholarly work [which generally means publications in referred journals] counts. Consult your department guidelines for other criteria. Blogs, unrefereed presentations at conferences, local civic groups, school groups, departmental gatherings, family gatherings do not count. Books and/or book chapters under contract do not count. Only published books/book chapters with scholarly reviews count.

Letters from external sources should not be from a friend or colleague with whom you have collaborated. The conflict of interest is obvious. Letters should be sought from scholars in your field who do not know you personally. Letters are not supposed to be character references or personality evaluations.

When smaller [in size] college faculty vote two or three times (e.g., as member of dept, as dept chair, as member of college R&T committee), the bias [for or against] is obvious. Such untoward voting should be acknowledged.

Departmental and College R&T discussions and votes should be kept confidential. Spreading to colleagues what has transpired is unethical and works against you.

Think carefully about your external letter writers for tenure and promotion.

Make sure to allocate your time proportionately with how the rank and tenure committee views your application.

Try to get as thorough of an annual review as possible from your department.

I think teaching is a good thing to bring up – I like to joke that if most of us, who went to top schools, had gotten the SAT's of our incoming students, would have been sent to bed without dinner. Teaching the students here is a new experience for most of us who've TA'ed at other schools (we always use to complain how dumb our students were – at Berkeley!).

I think the point is – aside from obvious, what is your teaching philosophy – that it's helpful for candidates to say how they improved, they understood these students better, got better at getting into these students' heads.

Portfolios should transparent and organized: Put key information early in narratives and make supplemental files easy to find.

Write for a broad audience: Ask friends outside your field to read your materials to make sure you are explaining things and prioritizing key points.

Practice your various "pitches" for time and content: Bring notes with key points for reference when nerves interfere with memory retrieval but also give yourself enough practice that you are key on what you want to convey.

As per Phil Kayal: If the first time I meet you or hear your name is when you come before the Rank and Tenure Committee, this is going to be a problem.

Interview question: What is your research niche? If you had a year's sabbatical at full pay, with no teaching or service duties, what would you do?

Interview question: If you were giving an interview talk, what undergraduate lecture of yours would you use? What topic?

The burden of proof for tenure/promotion is on the applicant - consequently present a case that is clear and that contextualizes the body of work completed (e.g., explaining how an article or book measures in relation to various publishing or conferencing venues in the discipline); ultimately this requires the candidate to DO the WORK at every level (teaching excellence, service commitments, and producing a body of scholarly work that is contextualized) leading to the crafting of narratives regarding how their dossier matches their department, college, and university needs/mission;

Pay attention to digital spaces such as Digital Measures and Blackboard; save files as PDFs and create a nomenclature that makes sense when naming files; incorporate supporting materials in DM and Bb to support the case and provide proof of the applicant's value; and

During the personal appearances, create a 5-minute overview of the case that summarizes the body of work; be organized, direct, and point to examples in the dossier; avoid being defensive or combative; see the interaction as a conversation and NOTE that the clearer the written and digital aspects of a dossier, the better the personal appearance will go.

Ask colleagues who have successfully applied for tenure and/or promotion if you can see their application and ask them to review yours (unless they're on an R&T Committee, which would create a conflict of interest).

Include all your course evaluations; cherry picking just makes your reviewers wonder what's been left out.

If you're planning to apply for promotion to Professor, make plans to be observed at least once if not twice before that.

Know yourself. The applications is more than a list of courses taught, publications and service activities. Use the narrative to craft a story describing a scholarly life.

Know your environment. Know the accomplishments of the departmental faculty who have come before you and be better. Demonstrate that you are the best. For full professor, demonstrate that you were a leader, not just a participant.

Know higher education. Especially for full professor, demonstrate the uniqueness and importance of your work in the broader societal and higher education contexts. Why should the university promote you (a big raise) when they don't have to?

Following promotion, put extra effort into developing esprit de corps and community among all faculty, students, staff and administrators. Real leaders do this without worrying about promotions and job titles.

This is an imperfect process driven by imperfect people. The same odd comments that you might have seen or heard when you went up for tenure may well come back in different forms.

For promotion after tenure, the game is the same. Structure your narrative. Sell yourself.

Inform the committee on what you plan to do (not just what you have done), because the university is investing in you when it grants tenure.

Keep your opening comments succinct -- five minutes or fewer -- and know what you want to say (i.e., script it, if necessary).

Follow the Faculty Guide regarding external references, and make sure that the evaluations are objective, preferably references who do not know you (although it is acceptable if they have met you, say, at a conference or have heard of you).

Per point 2, make sure the department's guidelines are up to date (e.g., guidelines on external references).

In particular for full professorships know what "leadership" means, and be prepared to demonstrate where you have shown it or are showing it.

I was once told "when you are ready to go up, go up." For many years, I found that rather confusing, not only because it sounds circular. It is not.

Make your no's frequent and your yes's count. Think about how you can contribute to Seton Hall using your strengths and talents as opposed to just taking up a seat on committees.

Ask colleagues for help. Rather than starting an IRB from scratch, ask for a related one that was successful to understand some of the nuances. If someone has taught the class you are assigned, ask what works well and where the pain points are. If you are asked to join an appointed committee, find someone who served on the last one or a related one.

Remember that fluency counts. Things that are easier to process are more likable so make your documentation clear and transparent.