The Tenure Process at Research Universities

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If you are just beginning a tenure-track appointment, it is critical that you understand how the tenure process works. You must decide how to allocate your effort across multiple activities to maximize the chances of a favorable outcome at the tenure review stage. These activities include conducting research, teaching, applying for grants, attending conferences, traveling to other universities to give seminars, refereeing, doing university service, and advising graduate and undergraduate students. This article provides an overview of how the tenure process typically works at a research-oriented university.

First, when does the tenure process begin? The formal tenure process begins about one year before your untenured appointment ends, or earlier if you decide that you would like to be reviewed for tenure ahead of schedule. The length of an untenured appointment varies across institutions but is usually around six years. Some institutions promote assistant professors to an untenured associate position, in which case someone may not come up for tenure for up to 10 years.

For faculty at research-oriented institutions, the primary consideration is your research output. However, most academic institutions also care about teaching quality, so your teaching performance is an important consideration.

The first step in the tenure process is usually a request that the candidate write up a research and teaching statement. The research statement is a detailed outline of the candidate's research agenda. The teaching statement describes the teaching the candidate did as well as the candidate's views on teaching. Before writing these statements, ask for samples of statements that have been used successfully in the past. The second step in the process is that the tenured faculty form a committee to conduct an *internal review* of the candidate's research and teaching. The committee usually consists of tenured faculty members from the same department who work in a similar research area. The research committee members read both the published and unpublished papers by the candidate. They often summarize the main contributions in writing and form a recommendation about whether to promote the person for tenure.

A similar committee may be formed to evaluate the candidate's teaching. The teaching committee (which may or may not be the same as the research committee) will review the history of the person's teaching in terms of classes taught, teaching scores and comments received from students in the classes that the person taught. A teaching review may include a polling of students to get additional feedback on the person's quality of teaching. The members of the teaching committee will usually also comment on the candidate's advising of graduate and undergraduate students, including the number of students advised and whether the person supervised graduate students, either as a thesis committee member or as a main adviser.

Another important part of the tenure process at most research-oriented institutions is the *external review*. It is usually mandatory to solicit outside letters for tenure-track faculty who wish to be considered for tenure. Typically, senior faculty decide on a list of names of tenured faculty at outside institutions (usually leading institutions) from whom to request review letters. The candidate may be asked to also suggest a few names. Letters are requested from 10-15 people that may include the candidates' graduate adviser. The reviewers from outside institutions are supplied with the candidate's c.v. and sometimes with a set of the main papers produced by the candidate. They may in addition get the research and teaching statements written by the candidate. If the candidate has gone on parental leave at some point, the reviewers are usually advised to disregard the time spent on leave. (For example, someone who is at the tenure review stage after seven years with one year leave would be regarded in the same way as someone who has been out for six years.) The reviewers are asked to comment on the quality of the research produced by the candidate, the impact that the research is having on the profession, and to make comparisons between the candidate and other people of a similar vintage or working in a similar area who have been promoted. For example, the reviewers are asked to make statements such as "Candidate X's research productivity is of higher quality than that of Y, who recently received tenure as institution Z." At leading institutions, there is an expectation that the candidate has become reasonably well known for some of his/her research. The main purpose of the external review is for your own institution to get an outside assessment of the quality of your research and contributions, but the process of sending for outside letters is also a signal to individuals at many other universities that you are up for tenure and therefore possibly also on the job market.

After the outside review letters are received, the letters and the research and teaching statements are then distributed among the tenured faculty in the department. The faculty vote on whether to recommend tenure. If a sufficient fraction vote affirmatively (the rules vary by institution), then a *dossier* is assembled that includes your c.v., the research and teaching review statements produced by the committees, your teaching and research statements, a record of your teaching scores, all of the external review letters, the results of the faculty vote, and usually a letter from someone like the chair of the department discussing the merits of your tenure case. The dossier then typically gets reviewed by a university-level committee, in some cases a standing committee and in others an ad hoc committee appointed by the Dean. That committee will include faculty from other departments across the university (for example, from the college of arts and sciences if the economics department is housed in the college of arts and sciences.) The precise process and the size and composition of the committee will differ by institution. This committee again reviews the evidence on your research and teaching/advising. They will also make note of other ways in which you may have contributed to the university (for example, by receiving major grant awards or by doing university service). This committee often writes another review of your dossier and votes on whether you should be recommended to the Dean for tenure. If so, the dossier then proceeds to a higher-level university administrator (for example, the provost), where it is subject to another review and approval process.

Now, let us return to the question of how to best allocate your effort across multiple competing activities: conducting research, doing teaching, applying for grants, attending conferences, organizing seminars, refereeing, doing university service, and advising graduate and undergraduate students. Given the time lags involved in the publications process and the primary weight given to research in the tenure review process, your primary focus should be on getting publications in the best outlets possible, especially early your career. Because many external faculty will be asked to assess your research, it is also important to make your research known by attending conferences and traveling places to give seminars, especially if you have an opportunity to present in front of audiences that eventually may be involved in your tenure review process. It is not very useful, though, to go to conferences/seminars if doing so interferes with your capacity for getting your own research done.

With regard to teaching, universities keep records on past teaching performance, including scores and comments received from students. Bad teaching can come back to haunt you. It is therefore important to not have scores that are systematically below the average for your department, and also to try to not have any particularly bad comments in your teaching portfolio that could raise questions about your ability to teach. Clearly, evidence of good teaching, such as teaching awards, will only increase your chances of being awarded tenure. But good teaching will not compensate for inadequate research, especially at leading research-oriented institutions. If you are unfortunate enough to have low teaching scores early in your career, your teaching record will look a lot better if there is improvement over time, as more recent teaching receives a higher weight than teaching done years earlier.

If you are assigned to a course in which you are having a very hard time getting decent teaching ratings, you may want to consider asking for a reassignment. It is often harder to get good scores in large, mandatory classes. Many universities have teaching centers that will help you to improve your teaching, but you may have to take the initiative and seek help. Even if nobody in your department tells you that your teaching is a problem, you should be proactive and try to improve your teaching on your own because low teaching scores are almost always a problem at the tenure review stage.

What about other activities that take a lot of time, like refereeing? Many faculty receive numerous requests to do referee reports for various journals. When someone asks you to referee a paper, here are some questions you should ask yourself. Is this a referee request from a journal you might submit a paper to someday? Are the members of the editorial board that are going to read your referee report the kinds of people who might eventually be reviewing your work? Is this paper related to your research, and will you potentially learn something from reviewing this paper? If the answer to most or all of these questions is "no," then you should not feel obligated to referee the paper. You do not have to referee every paper you get asked to referee. On the other hand, if you say no to refereeing a paper that is clearly in your area or from a well-known editor and/or from a leading journal, then the editor is likely to view that negatively. You should do refereeing, but you do not need to referee excessively, particularly if you have a backlog of reports to do and in cases there is no benefit from doing so.

Lastly, should a junior faculty member spend a lot of time applying for grants? Getting an NIH or NSF grant or other large grant will be viewed positively at the time of the tenure review. However, success in getting grants will not be viewed as favorably as success in getting research published. You should allocate effort to applying for grants to the extent that it facilitates your research (for example, when the grant allows you access to better data, makes it possible to hire productive research assistants, or facilitates collaboration with coauthors). Grant applications can be complementary with writing research papers. However, sometimes grant money is available for working on topics that may not lead to important research contributions. Sometimes the time delay before getting the grant is such that the grant will not facilitate research that can reasonably be done prior to the tenure review stage. Grants for doing data collection would fall into this category. If the data collection is unlikely to lead to a research publication in time for your tenure review, then it may be best to postpone the project until later.

It is a good idea as a junior professor to meet periodically with the chair of your department, or with some other senior faculty member with whom you feel comfortable, to talk about your progress. If such a meeting is not mandatory, then try to arrange a regular meeting on your own. That way, you can learn whether the senior faculty member thinks you are making good progress and get any recommendations for improvement.

You should also seek out advice from senior faculty when you are responding to an editor's letter and to referee reports on a paper that you submitted, particularly for your first few submissions. Senior faculty have a lot of experience responding to editors' letters and to referees, and they are usually happy to provide advice in this regard. There is an art to crafting responses to referees, and it usually takes awhile to develop these skills. If your paper gets turned down at some journal, senior faculty can often provide good guidance on other places to try. They usually keep track of what kinds of editors are working at which journals and who is likely to be favorable to the type of research that you do. Do not hesitate to seek out advice from more experienced faculty, even if no formal advising system may be in place.

The tenure process is unquestionably one of the most important times in your career, but it should not be a mystery. Understanding the process can hopefully help you prepare for it. Every department has its own idiosyncracies, though, and you should talk to your chair or other senior colleagues about how the tenure process works at your institution well before it officially starts.