Advancing Women in Leadership Online Journal
Volume 21, Fall 2006

Succeeding in Academia: Practical Strategies for Achieving Tenure and Promotion at Research Universities

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Abstract

Achieving tenure and promotion is an integral process to becoming a member of the academy's community. Tenure provides job security, ensures academic freedom, and protects faculty from institutional threats. As newcomers in the academy, women and minorities face challenges not previously encountered by their white male peers. Research indicates that in addition to scholarly, pedagogical, political, and personal issues, the tenure process for women and minorities also includes issues of gender and race. This paper provides women and minority faculty on the tenure track at research universities with practical strategies intended to facilitate their tenure and promotion process. The strategies focus on the three areas used in tenure and promotion decisions: research, teaching, and service.

Background

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), an individual's participation in a specific community of practice is at first "legitimately peripheral," increasing progressively as one's level of competence increases, leading eventually to full participation and membership in the community. However, the process by which newcomers become old timers in a community of practice is by no means linear. Instead, meanings and relations are continuously negotiated in a "conflicting, synergistic structuring of activity and relations among practitioners" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 56). For junior faculty entering a new career in the academy, negotiating their department and/or college's culture can be a daunting process.

Achieving tenure and promotion is an integral process to becoming a member of the academy's community. Tenure protects faculty from institutional threats and ensures academic freedom (Premeaux & Mondy, 2002). Tierney (2002) contends that without tenure there is no academic freedom and that "without the professorate's freedom to stretch boundaries and limits, society is at peril" (p. 60). Others maintain that the tenure and promotion process results in greater faculty productivity in the areas of research, teaching, and

service (Hum, 2001).

Although women and minorities have made strides in attaining doctoral degrees and academic positions, their numbers continue to cluster at the lecturer and assistant professor levels. According to a report by the American Association of University Women (AAWU), only one-fifth of the full professors and one-third of the associate professors in American universities are women (Dyer, 2004). As newcomers in the academy, women and minorities face challenges not previously encountered by their white male peers. Research indicates that in addition to scholarly, pedagogical, political, and personal issues, the tenure process for women and minorities also includes issues of race and gender (Cooper & Stevens, 2002; Dyer, 2004; Hamilton, 2004). Women and minorities are often viewed as "outsiders," particularly when their perspectives about and approaches to research, teaching, and service deviate from the status quo (Cooper & Stevens, 2002). Sex discrimination cases indicate that overt and subtle forms of sex discrimination in the tenure and promotion process play a role in the under representation of women in the higher levels of the professoriate (Dyer, 2004). Many women also experience role conflicts between their career's progression and parenthood and must balance their career paths with their goals of motherhood (Armenti, 2004; Collay, 2002).

At research universities the tenure and promotion review process takes place at the department, college, and university levels. Divergence among members of the tenure and promotion committees about a candidate's qualifications often occur, particularly at the university level, when committee members have differing perspectives about the value of research compared to that of teaching and service (Hearn & Anderson, 2002). Journals that publish research from department areas such as women or minority studies are sometimes viewed as less prestigious than the more traditional journals (Dyer, 2004).

One of the most often mentioned concerns of junior faculty is their institution's lack of clear expectations and guidelines regarding the tenure and promotion process (Austin & Rice, 1998; Cooper & Stevens, 2002; Diamantes, Roby, & Hambright, 2002). Women and minority faculty, in particular, report ambiguous guidelines and contradicting messages from administrators and colleagues at their institutions about the tenure process (Austin & Rice, 1998; Dyer, 2004; Olsen, 1993; Rice, 1996). Periodic reviews often lack clear, constructive feedback that might help junior faculty address areas of concern. As a result, women and minority faculty must take proactive measures regarding their tenure and promotion process.

The main goal of this paper is to give practical strategies to women and minority faculty on the tenure track at research universities to facilitate their tenure and promotion process.

Method

Although this is not a study in the usual sense of the word, it may be viewed as a "self-study" or as a reflection of "lessons learned" on my tenure and promotion process or, as Lather (1991) put it, "dialectical theory-building that aspires to focus on and resonate with lived experience. . . ." (p. 55). According to Heron (1981), "persons, as autonomous beings, have a moral right to participate in decisions that claim to generate knowledge about them" (in Lather, 1991, p. 56).

The practical strategies provided in this paper are based on my experience and that of colleagues as we went through the tenure and promotion process, and on my current work on the college and university's tenure and promotion committees at a Carnegie I Research university. In the years prior to my tenure, I organized a junior faculty support group and since then have mentored and shared my tenure materials and strategies with other women colleagues undergoing the tenure process.

Preparing for Tenure and Promotion

Seeking Information

Drawing on case studies, Cooper and Temple (2002) contend that often women and minorities "are marginalized in the academy because they are unaware of the tenure politics and processes at their university" (p. 26). Indeed, the lack of clear procedures and guidelines on the tenure process is often the greatest concern of junior faculty on the tenure track. As newcomers women and minority faculty often feel uneasy requesting information from administrators and senior colleagues due to a perceived power differential. Yet, having clear information about what is expected is essential to one's preparation for the tenure and promotion process.

- Request clear information from your administrators regarding what is expected in the areas of scholarship, teaching, and service (e.g., what counts as "scholarship," number of refereed articles expected, etc.). Ask for a copy of your college and university's written guidelines for tenure and promotion (Cooper & Temple, 2002).

- Meet with your department chair or assistant dean every year and ask for honest and constructive feedback on your activities and progress for that year.
- Meet with senior faculty members who recently served on your college's and/or the university's tenure and promotion committees and ask about procedures and expectations for tenure and promotion. Ask this person for feedback on your professional record (format, organization of activities, and overall presentation).
- Speak to colleagues who have recently gone through the tenure and promotion process and ask them to share with you their materials and strategies.

Mentoring

The transition from graduate school to the professoriate can be a daunting and lonely process as one navigates the department's and institution's cultures. As pointed out by Bronstein and Ramaley (2002), "The culture of the academy creates possibilities and barriers that inexperienced newcomers need to identify and manage" (p. 31). Mentoring facilitates newcomers' integration into the institution's culture, leading to feelings of connectedness and increased satisfaction with the work environment (Schrodt, Cawyer, & Sanders, 2003). Senior faculty can play an important role in the socialization of women and minority faculty (Cooper & Temple, 2002). Furthermore, senior faculty often chair important committees where they can serve as advocates for junior faculty.

- Actively seek mentoring from successful senior faculty who are receptive to your needs. Some institutions support mentoring dyads composed of a junior and a senior faculty member. If your institution does not support such mentoring approaches, suggest it to your administrators.

- Get to know your colleagues within your college and others in the university: their research interests, current projects, etc. Explore with them opportunities for collaboration in grants and/or publications.
- Develop collaborative relationships with colleagues outside one's department or college to help build support when departmental politics threaten one's tenure and promotion process (Cooper & Temple, 2002).
- Begin a "junior faculty support group" and mentor each other: read each other's work, collaborate on grants and publications, observe each other's teaching, and provide emotional support to each other. Do not isolate yourself; other junior faculty in your college will most likely be experiencing similar doubts and tribulations to yours.

- Stay away from departmental and college "politics." Stay as neutral as possible, without compromising your integrity.

Networking

At research universities the tenure and promotion review process takes place at various levels: department, college, and university. Divergence among members of the tenure and promotion committee about a candidate's qualifications often occur, particularly at the university level, based on committee members' perspectives about the value of research compared to teaching and service (Hearn & Anderson, 2002). Disagreements among committee members also tend to occur about candidates from disciplines viewed as "soft" (Hearn & Anderson, 2002). As a result, committee members rely on external reviewers for their evaluation of a tenure candidate's scholarship.

As newcomers to the academe, women and minority junior faculty are often reticent about developing collaborative relationships with others in the academy. In a study comparing tenured and untenured faculty's perspectives about the importance of collaboration and collegiality to the tenure process, a significantly smaller percentage of untenured faculty rated collaboration and collegiality as important (Diamantes, Roby, & Hambright, 2002). Furthermore, female respondents rated external evaluators as less important to the tenure process than did males (Stone, 1996). My experience in college and university tenure and promotion committees is that letters from external reviewers are crucial in tenure and promotion decisions.

- Be active in professional organizations. This will put you in contact with potential external reviewers of your tenure materials.
- Begin a file with names, contact information, and research area(s) of colleagues in your area or related areas of research (co-presenters at conferences or presenters listed under topics related to your research area, session chairs, discussants, or persons you meet in association committees).
- Develop informal relationships with them; seek their opinion about your work and consider asking them about serving as outside reviewers of your tenure and promotion materials. Note that usually for tenure decisions, external reviewers must be at the associate or full professor level and from institutions ranked at the same or higher level as the candidate's institution.
- Do not list potential external reviewers who do not appear to appreciate your work or who appear to disagree with your research paradigm; they probably will not rate your work very favorably.

Research

Scholarship, grants (ideally from large federal agencies), and publications (in peer reviewed journals) play the most important role in tenure and promotion decisions at research universities. As a result, women and minority faculty on the tenure track must allocate the majority of their time and effort to research and scholarship (Foster-Fishman & Stevens, 2002).

- If you just finished graduate school, use your dissertation to develop conference presentations and journal articles. New research projects take time to develop and members of tenure committees do not like to see large periods of inactivity in a candidate's record. As suggested by Bronstein and Ramaley (2002), ". . . capitalize on what you have already done" (p. 38).
- Often courses in doctoral programs require large assignments (e.g., a review of the literature on a topic; an action research study in a research course) that can be used for conference presentations and/or publications. Revise such course assignments from your doctoral program and submit them as conference presentations and publications.
- Use grants as a source of new data. All grant projects, even non-research grants, must be evaluated and a project's evaluation data can be used for conference presentations and/or publications. Foster-Fishman and Stevens (2002) also suggest "community-based outreach work" (p. 180) as scholarship.
- The students in your classes can be sources of data for presentations and publications, as long as there is no conflict of interest. Protect yourself by getting such studies approved through your institution's Human Subjects Committee. Bronstein and Ramaley (2002) also suggest involving students in

research projects such as in collecting and analyzing data.

- Make a list of journals in which you can publish your work. Make a file for each of them and include a copy of the submission guidelines and copies of recent articles published in the journal. Read the sample copies carefully and pay attention to formatting, language style, etc. The closer your article is to what the journal tends to publish, the greater the chances your article will be accepted.
- When the reviews of one of your articles are too daunting, go over the article again and send it to a different journal that might be a better fit for your work. As suggested by Bronstein and Ramaley (2002), ". . . keep it [your work] circulating until it finds a home" (p. 39). Note that it takes 1-2 years or more for an article to be published from the submission date.

Teaching

For many faculty including myself, teaching is the first priority, although it counts second to research in tenure and promotion decisions at research universities. However, poor teaching will not secure tenure even in research universities (Cooper & Nojima, 2002; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). The recent budget cuts have led to greater competition for students among universities and, as a result, even research universities are placing increasing scrutiny on teaching quality in tenure and promotion decisions. Tenure committee members expect faculty with appointments in teacher education programs to have especially good teaching evaluations, given their specializations in pedagogy. Electronic communication also facilitates student access to the highest college and university administrators, and increasingly, students use such technology to voice their concerns about a course and/or faculty member.

- Your reputation as a teacher will be established with your first course and once established it will likely follow you throughout your career. As a result, dedicate the necessary time to develop good courses that illustrate best practices.

- Take seriously the student comments in your course evaluations and try to address legitimate student concerns about your courses. Practice what you preach.
- Have regular office hours and try to answer promptly your students' emails and/or phone calls.

Service

Women and minority faculty often find service activities to be one of the most rewarding areas of their academic career. However, in most institutions, particularly research universities, service-related activities are not rewarded to the same level as research or teaching in tenure and promotion decisions, even though counting service as scholarship can lead to positive institutional outcomes. O'Meara (2001) found that carefully implementing service as scholarship can lead to consistency in faculty's workload and reward system, expand the institution's view of scholarship, increase faculty satisfaction, and strengthen the institution's service culture.

While some colleges/departments assign few service activities to junior faculty in order to help them focus on their scholarship, others use women and minority faculty as "tokens" to increase their institution's minority representation in service areas (Cooper & Temple, 2002). Women and minority faculty are often responsible for the advising and mentoring of minority and women students, particularly in fields where they are underrepresented; and are asked to be involved in community projects and to serve in service activities that are of little interest to the more senior faculty.

- Be parsimonious with the amount of time and effort you dedicate to service activities before achieving tenure and promotion. To the extent possible, choose service activities that are in some way related to your research interests and use them as sources of possible publications.

- Learn to say NO! Do not volunteer for committee tasks such as "secretary" that require additional time input. Serve on one or two committees a year and choose committees that do not require additional work outside the committee meetings.
- Become involved with the research associations in your field and do editorial work for journals in your research area. Such activities facilitate networking and although they are still classified as "service," they have more "weight" in tenure and promotion decisions because they foster the visibility of your institution.

Organization

Managing time is one of the greatest challenges faced by junior faculty, as they struggle with the many roles and demands related to research, teaching, and service (Cooper & Stevens, 2002). Being well organized is essential to every stage of the tenure process. As newcomers, women and minority junior faculty are often bewildered with the many roles they are asked to play: teacher, researcher, advisor, mentor. Even though tools such as computers help facilitate these roles, managing one's physical and technological clutter is essential to one's success and sanity. Because tenure and promotion decisions are based on evidence of one's performance in the areas of research, teaching, and service, it is important to know what "evidence" is worth saving over the first 5-6 years of one's academic career.

- Label three folders: one "Research," another "Teaching," and another "Service." As you receive artifacts related to each of these areas, place those materials in the appropriate folder: awards, media clips, emails/notes from students that highlight some aspect of your teaching, advising or mentoring, emails/letters from colleagues in your field requesting copies of conference presentations and/or publications, letters from committee chairs thanking you for your service in a committee, etc.
- Make a good copy of each of your publications that includes the cover page of the journal in which the article is featured. Organize your publications in chronological order beginning with the most recent. Attach the letter of acceptance to a copy of any article that is either in press or has been accepted for publication. These articles will have the same weight as any other published article.
- Organize your CV using the format provided by your institution and update it regularly. List your activities in chronological order beginning with the most recent: publications, presentations, grants, service activities, etc.

- If you co-author publications or grant proposals with others, write one or two sentences under the publication or grant reference in your CV explaining your contribution to the publication or grant. For example: "Authors' names are listed chronologically; all the authors contributed equally to the manuscript;" or "I analyzed the quantitative data and wrote the portion of the manuscript that dealt with the results on these data."

Time Management

The variety of roles and responsibilities related to a career in academia require good time management skills. Many junior faculty struggle with finding a balance between the various roles they are asked to play (Cooper & Temple, 2002). Women and minority faculty often focus on the activities that are most rewarding to them: teaching and service, which may consume most of their time, leaving little for the most important area in tenure and promotion decisions: scholarship (Cooper & Temple, 2002).

- Set aside 2-3 days/week for writing. Choose the setting (e.g., your home office) where you are least likely to experience distractions and/or interruptions.

- To minimize time conflicts, schedule your office hours outside your writing days and preferably on the days you teach. Tell your students those are the only days they can schedule meetings with you.

- Save at least a day a week for you to reenergize. Our well-being (physical and emotional) is essential to our success and is usually the aspect of our lives that we are most likely to overlook. Being able to compartmentalize and separate ourselves from our work, even if for only short periods of time, is essential to achieving balance in our lives. As suggested by Cooper and Temple (2002), "be sure to play on occasion" (p. 28).
- Exercise regularly and eat appropriately to reduce stress and promote physical and psychological well-being. This is essential to surviving the tenure and promotion process.

Was it all worth it?-A Personal Reflection

In the previous sections I tried to provide some clear, practical strategies in the areas used by institutions to make tenure and promotion decisions: scholarship, teaching and service. In this section I would like to share some of my personal experiences as a junior faculty at a research I institution to help the reader understand my perspective as I reflect on the first five years of my career in the academy. As Lather (1991) points out, "For praxis to be possible . . . theory must be open-ended, non-dogmatic, speaking to and grounded in the circumstances of everyday life" (p. 55).

As a doctoral student at a Carnegie I research university, the challenges related to tenure and promotion were already familiar to me as I witnessed some junior faculty lose their positions for failing to meet their institution's tenure and promotion expectations. Indeed, many of us in the doctoral program considered seeking for our career paths institutions whose tenure and promotion decisions were primarily based on teaching and service, rather than on research and publications. Ironically, my first job interview and job offer, which I accepted, was from a Carnegie I research university.

My first few years as a junior faculty were challenging. As I navigated my college's and institution's cultures, I had to face subtle sexism and/or prejudice from colleagues, and became involved in excessive service-related activities that consumed much time and effort, and counted little toward my tenure and promotion. I even considered leaving and applied for a position at a less research-oriented university. A few weeks later I withdrew my application after deciding that if I were to leave my institution, I would do so after achieving tenure. Once I made this decision, I was able to prioritize my activities better and allocate my time more efficiently.

In the fall of my sixth year as an assistant professor on the tenure track, I submitted my tenure folios. The following April I was awarded tenure and promoted to the rank of associate professor. I was also asked to become the chair of the Science Education Program. The following year I was asked to serve on the college and university's tenure and promotion committees, where I serve as an advocate for those who are viewed by some of my fellow committee members as "not good enough for tenure." In addition to my advocate role in my college and university tenure committees, I also try to play an active role in the success of my women and minority colleagues through guidance and mentoring. I have shared my tenure folios with many of them and gone over theirs before they submit them for review.

Conclusion

As more women and minorities enter academic areas traditionally dominated by white males, their research interests, approaches to teaching and service activities will begin challenging the existing notions of the value placed in each of these areas (Cooper & Stevens, 2002). Research indicates that the increased presence of women and minorities in non-traditional fields is followed by an increase in conflict and turnover until their representation reaches a critical mass (Hearn & Anderson, 2002). Thus, change can only be achieved when women and minorities achieve tenure in sufficient numbers to overcome their "token" status and become a sufficient force to tip the scale of the status quo. As Gittell, Ortega-Bustamante, and Steffy (2000) pointed out,

Members acting together in association with common values and norms are able to build networks among themselves and with others, further increasing the strength of their social capital. Networking leads to the formation of coalitions, increased status, and increased power. (pp. 123-124)

According to Moody (2000), "tenured faculty control the hiring and retention of their junior colleagues; faculty of color [and women] can defend their presence and interests in higher education, only by gaining tenure themselves" (p. 32). As more women and minorities enter the upper echelons of the professoriate and reach a critical mass, they will begin to effect change from the inside and help reshape the academy's culture and policies (Collay, 2002; Cooper & Stevens, 2002; Park, 1996)-changes that will help make the academy a more welcoming environment for newcomers; "forging a welcome ground not only for ourselves, but also for those who come after us . . ." (Cooper, Ortiz, Benham, & Scherr, 2002). Moreover, ". . . a diverse faculty brings us closer to a representation of the world we live in" (Cooper & Stevens, 2002, p. 9).

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