Five Tips for Making Tenure

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While the words "tenure track" make it sound like there's a smooth set of rails that will take you from hiring through to a position on the permanent tenured faculty, "tenure obstacle course" might in fact be a better description. During my 36 years on the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), I mentored dozens of faculty along that tenure track, almost every time, successfully. As I gained experience, I found I could boil my mentoring system down to five goals that I would share with new hires and, when the time came for promotion, with tenure candidates. These aren't necessarily easy goals to meet, but they're the right stuff:

1. Pick Good Problems

Before you can ever get that letter offering you a tenure track position, you have to survive what has become one of the most competitive hiring squeezes anywhere. It is not uncommon to have more than one hundred applications for a single opening. How can you stand out amid this crowd?

I'm guessing that you have already published something, either a book or book chapter based on your thesis or several research papers based on your thesis or on work done during a post-doctoral associate position. These need to be good papers (more on that below), but the content of those papers would not be the reason you would be hired. Universities hire faculty because of what they will do, not for what they have already done.

Think about your cadre of peers. Each one is smart, capable, well-educated, and motivated like mad. Ultimately, what will distinguish you from them is the importance of the problems you choose to work on. Competent work on an important problem is important. Even brilliant work on an unimportant problem, regrettably, is unimportant.

Important problems share certain attributes: centrality, extensibility, and accessibility. Centrality is my term for how work on one problem can impact work on analogous problems, even in fields somewhat distant from your subject. Extensibility is the promise of a rich pasture for silage if you succeed in getting through the gate of that first problem. And accessibility is the requirement that you be able, within a few years, to make meaningful progress.

If the research plan you submit outlines a program that has centrality, extensibility, and accessibility, there is a better chance of attracting attention than if you simply want to follow up on your PhD work. Think positive. Think big. But not too big, since accessibility is critical to success.

2. Write Good Papers

Oh, if only one could get that paper accepted by the journal. I spent seventeen years as co-editor of two different journals, and as I navigated through the shoals of reviewer reports and unhappy authors, I developed something that I call the "Believability Index." It's a way of organizing good papers, especially scientific papers. The point is to write the paper in order of decreasing believability. Start with well-established facts, then with documentation of the methods and demonstrations that the methods are valid, next with results, and only after the results have been fully described and presented, go into speculative discussion of how the results should be interpreted.

There is only enough space here to scratch the surface. My more detailed article, "How to Avoid the Reviewer's Axe," is available at stephendsenturia.com/articles.html.

3. Ask Questions at Conferences

When you come up for promotion, your department will collect reference letters from prominent people in your field. Will they know who you are? One of the best ways to get known is to ask questions, good questions, at conferences, especially when just starting out. Go to the microphone after a presentation. Say in a loud, clear voice, "This is so and so from such and such university, and here is my question." If your question is a good one, the graybeards in the room will notice, and if you do it more than once within a given conference, they will begin asking each other, "who is that so and so from such and such university?" Do it often enough and you will invited to join the program committee for the following year's conference, and once on that committee, you'll meet a whole new set of more senior colleagues.

4. Know Your Top Ten

It's often difficult to describe "your field." After all, the reason you were hired is that you do something different from what the others on your faculty do. My recommendation is to define your "field" by listing the top ten senior people you consider to be in your field, or at least well-enough related to it to be so-named. The reason for making this list is that when promotion time arrives, your department chairman will go out for letters. Some of these requests will go to names you suggest, but others, typically, will not. Instead, they are highly likely to come from the top ten. If the top ten know your work, great. If not, you have some work to do.

5. Proactive Inviting

If, as often happens, you make your list of the top ten and discover that you only know half of them, it is time for some proactive inviting. You send an email saying you will be in his or her area on such and such a day, and would it be possible to visit. Usually, if the date works, you get a yes and you also get an invitation to present a seminar. Now you and your work are known, at least to that top-ten member.

Conclusion

While you can't control all the events that might lead to your tenure decision, there's a lot you can do that will help build the kind of visibility that is so essential for success at a top-flight university. Much more can be said on these subjects, and I'll be happy to hear your story and answer questions by email. Send me a note at www.stephendsenturia.com/contact.

-- *This article was originally published in the July 2016 issue of Academic Leader.*