

THE YEAR OF THE TENURE DECISION: Strategies for Survival

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You are about to become a candidate for tenure at a university which requires its faculty to produce significant research. It is too late either to initiate or to publish any additional research which substantially enhances your credentials. (You should, of course, continue your research activity and, if a paper is close to acceptance for publication, you should rush to send in the revision.) Nonetheless, there are still ways of improving your chances of obtaining tenure and of dealing with this particularly anxiety-provoking step in your academic career. Moreover, you can avoid making certain mistakes that can delay or deny your promotion. It is important that you start to plan your strategy before your institution initiates its tenure decision procedure.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Your institution begins the tenure decision process by gathering the materials for your tenure dossier. Typically, the tenure dossier is reviewed by committees at several levels--the department, the school, and the university. Try to learn about the composition of these committees if the identities of their members are not confidential. This dossier is usually more influential at levels of review above your department, but it can also define the case at the departmental level and cause your senior colleagues to reexamine their own decisions in view of these documents.

You can influence the outcome by improving the final "packaging" of your case for tenure, but you need to know several things if you are to assist your chair in doing so. First, you need to know which kinds of information are included in the tenure dossier, how they are compiled and used, and their relative importance. The dossier usually includes the candidate's curriculum vitae, reprints of all published work, copies of current working papers, letters evaluating the candidate's research collected from established scholars in the same specialty at other universities, records of participation in university committees or other administrative duties, and teaching evaluations. As a dossier moves up to levels beyond the originating department, letters from persons within the university who have evaluated the dossier and/or taken part in the consideration at prior levels are typically added. These items include the reports of a reading committee, the chair's letter, and a statement of how you fit into the department's overall objectives. The relative importance of each of these items and the manner in which they are solicited or collected differ across universities and, sometimes, between departments in the same university. It is important that you know which items are to be included in your dossier and that you understand how they are solicited and their relative weight in the decisions by your department and your university. Then, you may be able to suggest arguments to your supporters or your chair—subtly, of course—if you think there is likely to be some negative evidence. For example, if your teaching ratings are generally mediocre, you might be able to point out that they are improving or that they are much better for graduate courses.

Second, you need to understand fully the implications of any choices you might have with respect to the timing and/or progress of your case. Should you come up early, i.e., before the institution is required to give you tenure or terminate your contract? Should

you consider going on leave for the academic term when the tenure decision is being made? Should you pursue outside opportunities and, if so, what should you do when you obtain an offer? There can be no standard answers to these questions, because the answers depend on the personalities and views of the persons who are most directly involved in making the tenure decision. Obviously, these views differ across persons and, therefore, across departments within universities and across universities.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

To answer questions about specific procedures used at your university and in your department, consult your mentor--the senior scholar in your department who has been guiding your professional progress up to this point. However, if you are like the majority of women assistant professors, you arrive at the tenure decision with no one whom you would identify as a mentor. In this case, find someone who would like to see you get tenure, who is trustworthy, and who understands the tenure process as it currently operates at your university. The hope is that such a person exists in your own department. If there is no accessible tenured faculty member in your own department who is completely trustworthy and is totally supportive of your promotion, consult supportive economists from outside your department, such as your thesis advisor. In addition, look elsewhere in the university. You should be able to find some knowledgeable senior women faculty members who are committed to furthering women's opportunities in academe. These women can tell you how the process really works (as opposed to formal descriptions of the procedure), can advise you on ways to strengthen the presentation of your case, and may be able to intervene on your behalf if irregularities arise. Even if you are one of the lucky few who have a mentor to smooth the way, it does not hurt to consult the feminist faculty at your university on tenure issues, although it might be better to do so discreetly, at least initially.

How can mentors, senior women faculty, or former thesis advisors help you during the year of your tenure decision? Senior faculty members are likely to have served on some tenure committees and to have engaged in conversations about other tenure cases. They have collected historical "data" on the concerns of past tenure committees in your department, your school, and your university. Such informal "data" may greatly assist you in influencing the "packaging" of your dossier and in deciding any procedural items on which you are consulted, such as the timing of the decision or the addition of particular items to your dossier.

In addition, if you are turned down at any level of review, mentors and advisors can evaluate any explanations provided by indicating whether the grounds cited are frequently used to turn down candidates, whether they are smokescreens for other reasons, or whether your case is making institutional history. They can advise you about alternatives for appeal, their benefits and costs, and their likelihood of success. (If your advisors are not economists, be cognizant that tenure requirements differ among the social sciences. While refereed articles are the most frequent measure of research achievements in economics, a book may be the "requirement" in the humanities and in other social science fields. Don't let noneconomists assume that your tenure case is weak because you have not published a book!)

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STEPS TO IMPROVE THE "PACKAGING" OF YOUR TENURE CASE

Most of your possibilities to influence the outcome occur at a very early stage. The following steps should be taken before your chair or other institutional official initiates the tenure decision process. You may be given twenty-four hours to provide a vita and a list of outside references. Be prepared for this possibility by giving these materials serious consideration early.

The first task you should pursue is the preparation of a brief summary of your scholarly interests and work (no more than a couple of pages). This summary should describe your overall area of interest and how the specific papers you have written and/or projects you have pursued fit into the overall framework. The purpose of this summary is both to explain your interests to nonspecialists and to show how you have seriously and consistently pursued those interests. It is not to enumerate articles. At many research universities, simply having published a lot of good papers in good journals does not constitute sufficient qualification for tenure. Instead, the reader of this summary should understand what you have done, why it is important, how you have been successful, and why this work forms a significant contribution to your field.

In your summary, however, you might indicate which papers were refereed (if that is important at your university), which were invited for a special conference or volume, or which won a competition. Other possible types of information include dissertations supervised (and perhaps the employers who have hired your students), conference participation (including serving as chair or discussant for a session), honors received since leaving graduate school, research seminars presented at other institutions, professional committee memberships, and teaching innovations, if these items strengthen your case. Also, indicate any outside research funding that you have received and the circumstances under which this funding was provided (i.e., competitive or solicited).

Because this summary may be read by any or all of several persons involved in your tenure decision—your department, persons solicited for outside letters, or noneconomists on committees outside the department—it is worth circulating a draft to your mentors and advisors. Follow their hunches about which points to highlight or expand and which to drop. When you and your advisors are satisfied with this summary, give it to your department chair and suggest that it be included in your dossier and provided as part of your vitae to any persons who are asked to write letters on your behalf.

In addition, because many departments send copies of a subset of the candidate's publications and working papers to outside reviewers, it is useful to prepare a list of the ones you consider most important. Be sure to choose your very best unpublished papers, as well as some published work.

The second major task is to prepare a list of all scholars outside your university competent to evaluate your research. List all the prominent persons in your field, as well as less eminent individuals whom you know to be familiar with your work. If you have not already done so, send every person on the list copies of working papers or of reprints that would most interest them. (You should have already been doing this as papers were written or published. Not only is this the way that reputations are built, but also the worst outside letter you can get is one that indicates a lack of familiarity with your work.)

In many universities, the candidate names at least some of the outside scholars from whom evaluation letters are solicited and the department or school names others. The nominees you select from the longer list are the scholars whom you think will provide the most favorable letters, but you should also include the names of the persons that the other sources are likely to suggest. Some departments will actually ask you to provide the all-inclusive list of senior scholars in your field, to guide them in their selection of outside reviewers.

In either case, consult with your advisors before submitting a list to your department's chair. In most research universities, tenure committees are looking for any reason to turn down candidates. A single lukewarm letter may destroy your chances. The hope is that your advisors can tell you about persons who are known to write erratic letters, consistently negative letters, or consistently positive letters. Be sure that your own nominees are either of the latter variety or are strongly supportive of your work. However, the reviewers known to be uniformly positive won't help to convince your department, so consider choosing reputedly tough people whom you are confident will write positive letters for you. Depending on your university's standards, you might include foreign scholars or scholars who are not strictly identified with your narrow specialty. Letters from foreign scholars are sometimes problematic, however, if the authors do not understand the American tenure system and its standards. Finally, if there are some senior people in your field with whom you have had disagreements that you think might undermine their ability to evaluate your work fairly, inform the senior member of your department who is most favorable to your promotion.

SOME DECISIONS TO MAKE

Other decisions you can make or influence include whether to search for another job, to alter the timing of your tenure decision, and to go on leave.

Entering the Job Market

For most economists, the year of their tenure decision is the time to enter the job market seriously. Job search is one way to advertise your work and your overall credentials, thereby enhancing your professional reputation and potentially improving your outside letters. Different departments' preferences for faculty appointments are highly interdependent. An outside offer from an approximately equivalent or better institution or department is likely to make you a more attractive tenure candidate in your own department and any outside offer can help you to get a fast decision. A thorough job search which provides you with concrete alternatives also softens the blow of a negative tenure decision. Finally, it is quite possible that you will obtain a better job than your current one, and the tenure decision becomes irrelevant.

Timing Your Tenure Decision

You may be able to affect when you come up for tenure through requests either to count or to ignore teaching experience at another institution, time at your current institution before you received your Ph.D., or time spent on leave. You can also force an early decision by threatening to take an outside offer if tenure is not awarded.

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Assuming that you are happy at your current institution and wish to maximize your chances of staying there permanently, timing may affect the probability of a positive tenure decision, other things being equal. Relevant factors to consider include temporary university budgetary crises or hiring freezes that are encouraging tenure review committees to be particularly tough; being in a cohort of particularly promising tenure candidates, so you wish to make your decision less directly competitive with theirs; and having several papers that you expect to be accepted for publication just after the "regular" decision date. Given the stakes involved in your own tenure decision, it is easy to become paranoid and anxious with respect to any request about the procedures involved—so having informed and trusted advice from more disinterested persons can help when these issues arise.

Going on Leave

Should you go on leave while your tenure decision is being made? There are several reasons to consider this possibility. For many people, there is added tension in working at the university each day when one's tenure case is under review. If you anticipate that you will scrutinize any questions about your research for hints of how the process is going and that you will evaluate every greeting from a senior faculty member for its implications for the tenure vote, then a leave might produce a less stressful daily routine. A leave for other employment or for research introduces you to new people, expands your reputation, and opens up new channels for outside offers, including an alternative if the tenure decision is negative.

There are potential dangers in a leave, however. The old adage "out of sight, out of mind" might apply and work to your disadvantage in some circumstances, such as in a department where interpersonal relationships and good citizenship activities are valued and you score particularly high on those items.

Mentors and advisors can assist you in evaluating these options in your own situation. If you stay, be sure to attend seminars, work long hours in your office, attend the department's social functions, and so forth, to maximize positive professional visibility. Try to schedule a research seminar before the department's vote, if you generally perform well in such presentations.

LEARNING FROM THE MISTAKES OF OTHERS

Three recent tenure cases illustrate some of the problems that can be encountered. The most egregious differences between how the tenure process is formally described and how it actually operates occurred with respect to the outside letters included in the dossier, as described in the first two examples. The last one serves as a warning to candidates holding outside offers.

In one recent tenure case at a major research university, the curiosity of a senior faculty member was piqued when the tenure review committee on which he was serving received an extremely negative letter concerning a particularly strong candidate for tenure. The evaluation was written by a highly regarded scholar whose work was closely related to that of the candidate. All other letters were strongly positive, but from scholars whose work was less central to that of the candidate. Because the senior faculty member was particularly supportive of the candidate and was also convinced that the confidential

outside letter process was open to violations by vindictive individuals, he decided to ask the candidate about her relationship with this scholar. (Incidentally, such consultation with the candidate after outside evaluators are chosen violates academic ethics.) The supporter was told that the negative letter writer had just lost his research grant and that the funder was now supporting--you guessed it--the candidate whom he evaluated so negatively. With this information, the supportive senior scholar was able to discredit the negative letter and the candidate received tenure.

This candidate was fortunate to have a senior colleague who was willing to risk a breach of ethics for her. Most junior faculty are not so lucky. Be sure you inform your most trusted senior colleague of any reasons someone who is likely to be consulted on your promotion might possibly contribute a less than fair review. If possible, tactfully mention your misgivings to your chair before the list of references is completed and before your evaluation committees are appointed.

At another research university, a department's chair who was not supportive of a woman candidate allowed the other candidates to select all their outside reviewers, but did not allow the disfavored candidate the same opportunity. While such manipulation of the outside evaluation process is unethical (and illegal when it is differentially applied to male and female, or to minority and nonminority, candidates), it is rumored to happen frequently and it is almost impossible to detect. This chair was caught, however, because he went one step further and actually removed positive outside letters from the dossier of his disfavored candidate, who was initially denied tenure. After an internal grievance procedure, during which the chair's behavior came to light, the decision was reversed and tenure was awarded.

Another form of manipulation occurs when potential outside evaluators are contacted about their opinions before they are selected to write official reviews or when the desired evaluation is indicated along with the request for an assessment. Institutional insiders will have some perspective on whether such manipulation occurs in your university.

The final story of a tenure decision gone awry deals with the use of outside offers. One assistant professor received an unsolicited tenured offer at a university that she viewed as only marginally inferior to her current institution. Although she was not due to be reviewed for tenure until the following year, both her department's and her school's tenure committees supported her promotion in response to her outside offer. After being told by many powerful persons within her current institution that the university's tenure review committee was not a real hurdle and that her promotion was certain, she declined the outside offer in order to permit the other institution to extend a timely offer to someone else. She was subsequently turned down by the university committee and advised that, since this was an early promotion, they would be happy to reconsider her the next year. Indeed, she did receive tenure the next year. Her refusal of the outside offer before she had officially gotten tenure at her current institution cost her another year of uncertainty, however.

If all works well and you receive tenure, you will no doubt be asked to participate in future tenure decisions and to write outside letters for other candidates. If you think that the candidate is deserving of tenure, remember my previous admonition that any negative or lukewarm comments in an outside letter can be used to turn down the candidate. If you support the candidate, write a clearly and completely positive but specific letter.

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