Essay on how to craft your research dossier to win tenure

Submitted by Jacob L. Vigdor on February 26, 2014 - 3:00am

This is the second part of an essay on setting a research agenda to win tenure. The first part may be found here. [1]

Stage III: Sealing the Deal

So now your clock is running out. In some cases, you'll be asked to write up a personal statement to be included in your dossier. This can be a tricky thing to write. On the one hand, it will be read by experts in your field. On the other hand, it will also be read by some people who don’t know the first thing about your field. How can you possibly write one document to serve such disparate audiences?

My advice: go non-technical. We're not talking Dr. Seuss non-technical, but at the level you'd expect research discussed in a magazine for intelligent adults. I’ve certainly seen plenty of very technical, jargon-laden personal statements – not just in STEM fields, but humanities and social sciences as well. As an outside-the-field reader, they do very little for me. I, like most readers I’m sure, end up looking elsewhere in the dossier to figure out what the scholar does. Even if I’m reading a statement from a scholar in my field, however, I’d much prefer to have them tell me what they’ve accomplished in common prose. Going non-technical forces you to think a bit more deeply about what your body of research really means, what it amounts to, where it is heading. And this is exactly what the people reviewing your dossier are trying to assess.

Your tenure review is ultimately not about what you have accomplished. It's about what your colleagues can expect from you in the future if they keep you around. It happens to be the case that these expectations are largely based on what you have accomplished, so forgive the circular reasoning. But your colleagues will be paying attention to your future plans. Particularly in cases where the track record to date is on the borderline, a strong discussion of work “in the pipeline” can make a big difference. It's not a bad idea to send out unpublished work with your dossier, so long as you have some feedback to suggest that work is of good quality.

At some universities, candidates have the option of suggesting names of letter writers, or scholars from whom names should NOT be solicited. There isn’t much point in providing names. Think of it this way: suppose your department gets letters from people you suggest and others as well, and suppose that the only good letters come from the people you suggest. Now suppose that all the letters are equally good – it doesn’t really make a difference whether you suggested names or not in that case. So there isn’t much upside associated with naming names, but there is a downside.
If you’ve managed to accumulate some real enemies – for example, scholars whose work you’ve criticized or refuted and who aren’t that happy about it – you might be inclined to put them on a “veto” list if you get to provide one. But you’d be surprised how many senior scholars in that situation end up writing a positive letter – and a great letter from a person you disagree with can really push your dossier over the top. If that person ends up writing a negative letter, your colleagues will have a chance to do damage control in the report they write, noting the intellectual dispute that predated the letter.

After you submit the dossier, you wait. Definitely submit updates if you receive good news, such as an article acceptance or book award. And don’t worry if the wait goes on and on – no news is no news. Your dossier may be held up waiting for some dean somewhere to write up a cover letter, or trying to schedule a meeting involving a few busy administrators with hectic schedules.

When the wait is over, ideally, you get tenure! And then the only question is, what next? That will be the subject of a later post.

When Things Go Wrong

I’ve known many colleagues who have elected to leave an assistant professorship before the clock ran out. And I’d bet that just about every assistant professor entertains thoughts of leaving at some point. Many times, the departure is for another assistant professorship at another institution. Leaving for another tenure-track job, whether by going formally on the market or taking advantage of an opportunity that falls in your lap, makes the most sense when it gives you access to a better set of resources – colleagues, research infrastructure – to get your work done.

Sometimes, you may be tempted to get out of the self-directed research game entirely. The tenure track is stressful in part because not all the determinants of your success are within your control; the publication process can be arbitrary and capricious, and some departments just don’t have the right kind of resources – human and otherwise – to help junior scholars in a particular subfield find their way. When moments of angst arise, ask yourself whether you enjoy the work. It is definitely no fun to get a rejection letter, and sometimes working on requested revisions is only slightly more fun than being rejected.

Ask yourself these questions. Do you live for the moments of discovery that come along with being a researcher? Is it a source of joy that you have the freedom to set your own research agenda? Or is it a source of anxiety? The main selling point of an academic career is this freedom. Quite a few junior scholars discover they can live without it. And many of them discover that their skills are highly valued in the marketplace, when put to work on someone else’s agenda. It can be a very soft landing.

Some scholars will stick with the program until the clock runs out, only to be denied tenure. In many of the cases I’ve witnessed, the real problem was not necessarily a lack of productivity on the part of the scholar, but a poor fit between the scholar’s agenda and the resources of the department. In these cases, being denied tenure might end up being the best thing that ever happened to the scholar – if it means relocating to a department more appreciative of, and better able to support, his or her agenda. That leaves only a small residual number of cases where the scholar really didn’t manage to accomplish much. Even for these people, a career transition often changes life for the better. At least one study has shown [2] that junior faculty overestimate the severity of the shock associated with being denied tenure.

When all is said and done, the goal is career satisfaction, to do things that others value and derive happiness as you do them. If some part of the equation is not working out, have the courage to tinker
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