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You Are Never a Sure Thing

By David D. Perlmutter

The assistant professor was shocked. For six years on the tenure track, all the assessments of his work had been positive—or at least not negative. His annual evaluations rated him consistently good or better on teaching, service, and research. The sparse written comments from his chair were in the vein of "you are doing what you need to do." The promotion-and-tenure committee had easily approved his third-year review—allegedly the crucial hurdle on the path to tenure.

Informal measures also indicated his tenure case was a go. Senior faculty members made encouraging comments: "Looks good" and "Don't worry, you are doing fine." His faculty mentors waved no red flags. Several even implied—or seemed to imply—that he was a "sure thing" for tenure.

The coda to this uplifting tale? A split departmental vote granting him tenure, followed by a tepid letter of support from the chair, capped off by denial from the upper administration. What happened to the sure thing?

The above scenario is a version of a story I have heard often in my two decades in higher education. Sometimes, unfortunately,

departmental reviews and faculty mentoring are cryptic or unhelpfully positive. The senior professors choose to put off the ugly task of negative criticism until it can be rendered anonymously through a tenure vote.

But you don't have to be merely a leaf floating down the river of the promotion-and-tenure process. You can ascertain whether the feedback you are getting is faulty or incomplete. And you can take steps to make it reliable.

Show you are open to critique. One way to attract an accurate reaction to your work is to convey unambiguously that you actually want honest assessment, even welcome it. We have all met people who react poorly to criticism, even the most constructive kind. They fall to pieces at a hint of negativity. After a while, the overseers of the early careers of those fragile souls may feel reluctant to confront them, to the eventual peril of the tenure candidates.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the ego-tripping star. These young scholars are always right and always brilliant. They resent or ignore any proscriptive suggestions. A department chair recalled one such deluded fellow as someone who submitted grant proposals at the last minute, never seeking any advice. Then, when he was turned down, he blamed everyone but himself. Likewise, negative student and peer evaluations of his teaching were met with scorn or silence. Again, the outcome, if you are such a rock of refusal, may be radio silence—until you get shot down at the tenure vote.

It's a smart strategy to signal to senior professors that you genuinely want honest appraisals of your productivity and performance in research, teaching, and service. Unless what they are saying is really malicious or factually false, your attitude should be genial and your

response in the line of "Thanks, this will be very useful." And maybe it will.

Actively seek assessment. The institution where I received tenure had an effective system for rendering candid and comprehensive evaluations to junior faculty members. The mainstay was an end-of-year meeting at which an assistant professor sat down with the entire senior faculty to go over the candidate's annual review, and ask and answer questions. While not a few of us were nervous going into the meeting, we all appreciated how the ritual forestalled the delivery of contradictory advice and made the expectations of the department absolutely clear.

If you feel your department is not giving you enough feedback, or you question whether it is as frank as it should be, there is no rule that you must stand passively by. Ask to meet with the department chair and the P&T committee's leaders to review your reviews. Make sure they understand this is not an occasion for you to protest or whine but rather to help you completely understand their comments and suggestions and to clarify any advice for improvement.

Weigh the limitations of faculty opinion. One of the problems with being told that you are a "shoo-in" for tenure is that most faculty members are autonomous in their opinions on the subject. Professor Hatfield may indeed think you are doing outstanding work and plan to vote aye in your favor, while Professor McCoy in the next office silently harbors a low estimate of your teaching and plans to vote nay.

Furthermore, views and circumstances change. Hatfield may have told you, over a second glass of Chablis at a holiday party in the fourth year of your tenure track, that you were "blowing us away"

and that the tenure vote would be "just a formality." But some 800 days later, at the actual vote, he may have forgotten his prediction or changed his mind.

The human being, whether a physicist or poet, is a variable animal. So take an expression of support by one person as just that: a snapshot of opinion at one time, probably honest but not a legal and binding contract.

Identify the key players and opinion leaders. Some people in an academic department are more influential than others. In your years building up to your tenure candidacy you will likely identify the opinion leaders among your colleagues. Interestingly, they may not be the folks who declaim their opinions the loudest or longest at faculty meetings: I have met many behind-the-scenes mobilizers and consensus builders in my time.

Your goal is not only to spot such influential players but also to get their sense of your progress. That may not be as simple as just asking them. The backslapper will tell you that you are wonderful. But the quiet leader may feel, ethically, that he wants to be careful about what he tells you.

I encountered one such fellow on my tenure track. I asked him if my research was meeting departmental standards. His response was (a) a short lecture on the rewards of exceeding standards, not just meeting them, and (b) a professed inability to judge my work because he had not read any of it. He was polite, but I was hurt—until three months later when he took me to lunch and announced that he had read my new book, praising it highly. He became one of my strongest champions. I learned that his deliberate caution made him as influential with the senior scholars as with me.

Know the tenure standards, not just the hearsay. Especially around springtime, I get calls from devastated assistant professors around the nation telling me that they were just denied tenure. My first question is, "What are the tenure standards at your institution?" I am no longer surprised at how many don't know or have only reviewed the written standards after it is too late.

Problems occur when what you hear does not match what is in print. Take a department with 20 faculty members, 15 of whom are tenured. In a perfect world each of them will be well versed in the department's standards on research, teaching, and service. In practice, myths and false assumptions sometimes get passed along. You as a tenure candidate, like all humans, may be predisposed to hear "feedback that fits"—that is, advice that confirms what you want to hear.

A simple expedient: Make sure that in any annual-review meeting you have the written standards in front of you and that you get clear guidance about how those standards are applied and interpreted.

Ask the recent veterans. For promotion and tenure, mentoring is essential, but the dyad need not always be a senior scholar tutoring a junior one. Often your best source of advice will be recently promoted peers. What lessons did he or she learn about the departmental evaluation system? Are there signs to look out for that suggest you are slipping? Are there code words that might hint at problems ahead?

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Review tenure standards at peer institutions. Contact tenure-track faculty members at peer departments; share experiences and observations. Ask for copies of their promotion-and-tenure guidelines. Do your achievements match or exceed the expectations

nationally as well as locally? If so, then that is an independent confirmation that you are on the right track.

Fix problems—even those no one has pointed out. Many senior faculty members (like my champion mentioned earlier) are somewhat wary of probationary scholars asking if their achievements meet tenure guidelines. Guidelines are, after all, not necessarily a ceiling. We are in a business that welcomes and rewards overachievers. You don't need sworn testimony that something in your record is a problem to undertake to improve it. Teaching is a good example. While young faculty members should not be required to be amazing teachers, you should be somewhat skeptical if a gray eminence tells you, "Just concentrate on your research." There are very few places in the academy today where completely ignoring your teaching is acceptable.

Correct falsehood, contextualize critiques. Trying to get the best information may also help you identify when people have bad information about you. I once talked to a tenure tracker who complained about errors in his first two annual reviews. Unfortunately, this was his fifth year, and he had only now decided to read them. While you don't want to get a reputation as a nitpicker, nobody but the most churlish chair or defensive tenure-committee member will object if you correct factual errors in assessment reports and reviews. Take the time, for example, to total up your listed average student-evaluation scores and the impact ratings of your scholarship. By the way, it is the honest thing to do and a politically impressive act that, if you find any errors that were made in your favor, you nevertheless expose them.

In the end, accepting that there are no "sure things" on the tenure track is not a resignation to fate or failure. Making sure that you are

fully in touch with what the people who judge you really think of you is always wise. Such attentiveness may also have another benefit. If you determine that you have found yourself in a truly dysfunctional, random, or unfair system, you will have an early enough warning to try to get out before disaster strikes.

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alf11 2 hours ago

All great advice, but I urge assistant professors to know the tenure standards and process at the college and/or university level too. Of course college and universities committees are supposed to accept the departmental standards, but if those standards aren't respected or the balance in one department is seen as too heavily weighted toward teaching or research by others in the college/university, unwitting assistant professors can unwittingly get caught by those politics.

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11159786 1 hour ago

There is one very serious defect in this column: "standards" are intentionally ambiguous at most places. This means that someone may look quite good on paper and not get tenure for one of several reasons. The

most common origin of tenure rejection at my large research university is an unenthusiastic set of external letters. These are impossible to predict because the reviewers have not been consulted in advance and each has his/her own criteria (which are not at all the numbers used by bean-counting faculty and administrators, like the number of grants, papers, talks,....). Thus, well-meaning colleagues often are not reliable sources of assessments of tenure prospects, since they usually are not expert in the candidate's field and can judge only on the basis of the tangible "facts".

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R.O.P. Lopez 36 minutes ago

This is great advice given the system that exists.

Eventually this system of promotion and tenure has to end, however. It's inhumane and it has destroyed too many people's lives to keep doing it the same way. The problem is that the system is based on people with PhDs being naturally ethical and objective in how they evaluate newcomers. When only 3% of the country went to college and the professoriate was a small, tight-knit group of scholars, then maybe you could count on an ethical conscience forming a natural part of the professor's persona. Now higher education is a huge multitrillion dollar business and people with PhDs are a mass of people with their own ambitions and agendas.

One point I'd like to echo from David Perlmutter is the question of knowing what the tenure standards are, not only at the department but at the higher administration levels. It is important to have the handbook in front of you while you are putting together your promotion binders and plug everything you've done into the specific categories that the university sets forth.

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