

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

The Professor Is In: 4 Steps to a Strong Tenure File



By *Karen Kelsky* | OCTOBER 15, 2017

What advice would you give to someone who is about to go up for tenure? It is such a daunting process. I would love to know what to focus on.

Think of the tenure process as applying for your own job — on steroids. All the

components of the tenure-track market are there as you take pains to represent yourself well and are carefully scrutinized. But the difference is: When you are being hired, you are chosen at least partially (or even largely) on the basis of promise. When you are applying for tenure, you are being assessed on your accomplishments. Similarly, that moment when you are offered a job is — as I say in my writing on negotiations — the time when you hold the most power. When you are applying for tenure, you have the least amount of power. In anthropological terms (my field), the stretch between when your tenure dossier goes out and when you receive the decision is a period of liminality. Your previous social identity is behind you and you cannot return to it, but you have not yet entered your new social role.

So you must apply for tenure methodically, strategically, and with enough time to tick all the boxes, fill out all the (frequently redundant) statements and forms, and gather all the requisite artifacts. One of the biggest mistakes people make is to misunderstand the difference between the job applicant and the tenure applicant — and craft their tenure appeal based on feelings, sentiment, and youthful potential. None of those things fly in a tenure statement. You get tenure based on quantifiable outcomes, period.

Here are the four key steps that go into a strong and, hopefully, successful tenure

application.

Step No. 1: You must have a clear understanding of the economy of value in your specific institution — namely, the distribution of importance between research, teaching, and service. That distribution will be formally quantified for you on some campuses. At many research-oriented institutions, for example, it will be something like 40 percent research, 30 percent teaching, and 30 percent service. At the very top research powerhouse universities, it may be 60/30/10. At teaching-oriented colleges, the proportions might be flipped to emphasize teaching. As you write the narrative making your case for tenure and promotion, you need to mirror the importance awarded to different categories at your institution — in some cases even literally, in terms of how much space your narrative devotes to each leg of the stool.

Step No. 2: Know exactly what is required of you in each of the three categories. Actually you should have been aware long ago of your institution's tenure requirements because if you haven't fulfilled the different criteria for each category, it is too late now. And just barely fulfilling them is not enough. You also have to know how to present and narrate your accomplishments to show that they span the full range of institutional expectations. At some institutions and in some fields, "research" may mean just scholarly books and articles. At other campuses, it may also mean demonstrating an active record of applying for grants. Likewise with teaching: At some colleges you may have to show that you developed X number of new courses, while at others "mentorship" (in the form of independent studies or internship supervisions) is just as



The Professor Is In

Karen Kelsky has advised countless graduate students and junior faculty members on how to navigate the perilous waters of the job search. Twice a month she answers questions from readers on all aspects of the hiring process. Here is a sampling of her recent columns.

- The Professor Is In: What if Your Teaching Experience Is Not 'on Brand' for the Hiring College?
- The Professor Is In: 'Should I Mention I'm From the Area?'
- The Professor Is In: It's Hard to Be Ill in Academe

important as teaching specific courses. When I advise clients who are going up for tenure, I always tell them to split their CVs between service to the department and service to the university, because those are two distinct things, and they are weighed variably at different institutions. You have to know what different things are "worth" where you are, and foreground them accordingly in your tenure file.

Step No. 3: Know what has worked at your institution. If possible, ask senior colleagues — especially the recently tenured ones — to share their narrative statements. Pay attention to how they structured their tenure statement, what they highlighted, and — this is important — how they discussed any weaknesses in their applications. At some campuses, strategic framing that minimizes or counterbalances the weaknesses plays better; at others, that won't work. At some places, a detailed explanation of why you had bad course evaluations for that one class will work in your favor; at others, it will make it seem like you are justifying your lack of professionalism and not taking responsibility.

Step No. 4: Write a fact-based and primarily quantitative document — NOT a dreamy, sentimental, naval-gazing narrative of your loves, likes, personal discoveries and epiphanies. No one cares about your pride, honor, and humility, or your feelings about the students and the mission of the campus. I edit tenure documents frequently at The Professor Is In, and they are without question the very worst, most unprofessionally written documents I handle. They veer wildly (truly wildly) between paroxysms of grandiosity and groveling insecurity. They almost always reveal a complete and total misunderstanding of the purpose of the document, which is to crisply *show* your accomplishments in terms of number of courses taught, number of students taught, success in teaching those students, number of publications, rank of publications, number of conferences papers given (all of your publications information should be articulated within a dynamic and forward-looking arc), conference and grant activity, and substantive service. Feelings, opinions, and sentiments play no more role here than they do in any other professional document you write, and have a more deleterious effect when the stakes are so high.

Having said all that, there is one factor that is far more relevant in tenure documents than it is in application cover letters: the highly individualized variable that is "institutional culture." When you are a job applicant, unless you are that rare inside

candidate, you simply are not familiar enough with the institutional culture to engage with it. By contrast, when you are up for tenure, not only are you familiar with it, you are also being assessed on how well you have assimilated into it in your six years on the campus.

The best way to combine the two imperatives I note here — (1) write a fact-based document, and (2) do it with an approach that matches institutional culture — is to study the statements written by your predecessors who earned tenure there.

Step No. 5 (Optional): Go on the faculty job market. Do it selectively, and don't apply to jobs that you absolutely would not take, nor to any jobs that are so inferior to yours in prestige or salary that they would be of no use for a potential counteroffer.

There is a reason why it's common wisdom that you go on the job market in your tenure year: It is half leverage chasing, half safety net. If you are a desirable hire, and your institution wants to retain you, then you may once again end up in a position of (some) power.

This moment is also likely your last opportunity to move laterally into an assistant professorship at another institution (be aware that if you do move laterally or up in status at this stage, you will almost certainly lose years of credit toward tenure, as I describe here and here). If you are unhappy in your current job, seriously consider going on the market now. Once you've earned tenure, is much harder to move laterally as an associate or full professor, simply because there are far fewer job openings at those ranks.

Karen Kelsky is founder and president of The Professor Is In , which offers advice and consulting services on the academic job search and on all aspects of the academic and postacademic career. She is a former tenured professor at two universities. Browse an archive of Kelsky's previous advice columns here .

© 2020 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037