

ADVICE

'Operation Keep My Job'

What to do when your third-year review leaves you on shaky ground



Katherine Streeter for The Chronicle

By Bethany Albertson | MARCH 02, 2016

I had my third-year review in the spring of 2013, and it was rough. I wasn't publishing enough and my future at the University of Texas at Austin was uncertain. As my very nice, very supportive chair sat across from me to explain the situation, he mentioned that our colleagues were afraid he would sugarcoat it. That was when I knew I was in real trouble. Of course, I knew the threat of tenure denial was real already — some of my favorite people have been denied tenure. And I could read my CV as clearly as anyone. But, as he talked about his worries, I knew that it was *really* real. I felt it in my bones. And I panicked.

The stakes for me and my family were high. I had moved to Austin so that I could live with my husband, who was tenured in a different department at the university. If I had to find another job, it would mean another

round of "Who wants to hire two political scientists"? We'd played that game already, and from what I hear, it's just getting harder. We had a 2-year-old son who had a really great pair of cowboy boots he loved. We had a decidedly two-income mortgage. What's more, I really liked the university. I liked my colleagues, I liked Austin. This was the place where I learned to love teaching. The cynical side of me said: Don't fall in love with an institution because institutions can't love you back. But the romantic side of me was attached to my university.

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Once my panic subsided (a bit), I started planning. I'm sharing my plan, OKMJ — Operation Keep My Job — because we don't tend to talk about our struggles on the tenure track. Perhaps there is something in my experience that can help someone else. Adapt as needed, but here are the steps I took to turn things around.

I corrected my record. My third-year review pointed out several shortcomings, and most of them were fair criticisms. One of them wasn't. The paperwork coming out of that meeting said that I had a significantly higher amount of course-release time than was the case so I made sure that my record was accurate.

I asked for help. This is the most important piece. I asked colleagues to look at my writing, to read my reviewers' letters, and to help me figure out where to submit my work. I asked my friends to join me for writing dates at coffee shops. I asked friends with quiet homes if I could visit them for writing weekends. I asked my husband to solo-parent when I went away for writing weekends — I did that three times and it was invaluable. I asked for help from my husband (Josh) and my co-author (Shana) the most. They were instrumental in OKMJ and I couldn't have done it without them.

I said no to lots of things. No, I can't review that article. No, I can't review that book. No, I can't write a chapter for an edited volume. No, I can't attend a seminar on having it all because I'm too focused right now on having this one thing. I had a stock "I can't review this article (that's completely unrelated to my research) because I'm very busy trying to keep my job" response. Every time I sent one of those emails I felt tremendous relief. And I almost always received a very understanding reply.

I created daily reminders to keep my eyes on the prize. I changed my password to a variant on the word "tenure" — seriously. I also posted a little notecard that said "Keep Swimming" on my computer. Dory was right.

I revisited old manuscripts that had been rejected. I had written a paper I loved, but it just couldn't find its way through the journal process. I reworked it and added new data, but I was nervous about yet another rejection so I sat on it. The longer I waited to resubmit it, the worse I felt. But then, I found a solution: I sent the revised manuscript to my husband and asked him to submit it to the journal for me. Problem solved. I know, there's probably a bigger psychological process I should work through, confronting my failures, etc. But I had no time for that. The clock was ticking so I outsourced the final submission process. This time, the journal accepted the paper (although one of my reviewers said it felt dated; fair enough). One thing I learned by having someone else handle the logistics of the submission for me is that I'm a terrible judge of what might get published.

I changed the stories I told. We all have stories about the times we were screwed over, and we're lucky if it's just one. I had a few really good stories. I would tell them, my colleagues would nod with understanding, some would get mad right along with me, and for a moment my short CV would seem less short. At some point I realized I had to stop doing that or I might complain my way to a tenure denial. People would be sympathetic if that happened, but that wasn't my goal. My goal was to get tenure, and I had to start telling stories that fit.

I was open about my tenure anxiety. I leaned on my friends — a lot. I shared my anxieties and sought out support. My nonacademic friends would say things like, "Of course you'll get tenure and you'll be fine." My friends inside academe would say, "You might not get tenure and you'll be fine." Both sets of friends were incredibly valuable.

I kept doing things I enjoyed — even when they didn't necessarily "count." Did I spend too much time on my teaching? Did my political psychology students need original survey data for their papers? Did the faculty panel really need my pop-culture expertise for the annual "Are you smarter than a professor?" panel? The obvious answer to all of those questions was No, but I answered Yes to them anyway. Several times in my push for tenure, a colleague or a little voice inside my head would ask: Is that the best use of your time? And it probably wasn't. But besides wanting to earn tenure, I also had this crazy goal of wanting to continue liking my job. So along the way, I did a few things that probably didn't help my case but made me happy.

Yesterday I received a lovely email saying that I've been awarded tenure. Operation Keep My Job is a success.

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The Professor Is In: How to Hop From One Tenure-Track Job to Another

By Karen Kelsky

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