

Twenty-Five Things You Wish Your Mother Would Have Told You About Tenure

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The road to tenure can be riddled with potholes and landmines. Often faculties entering the world of academia are clueless about how the process actually works. Back in 1993 when I landed my first job in academia, I had no idea what it meant to be a college professor. I had not taken any classes on how to teach or how to prepare a course syllabus. I had no knowledge of what it meant to be a tenure-track professor. My first job was at a small historically black college in rural Mississippi. I was grateful for the job. I was assigned classes to teach. I simply emulated what I had seen professors that I admired do. They were my mentors. Luckily for me, it turned out okay. I certainly would not suggest this in today's day and time.

I had not planned to be a college professor and did not have a road map. I went in the field of teaching merely by happenstance. In the field of Career Counseling there is a theory known as the Happenstance Theory. Basically, what this theory suggests is that in life there will be unplanned events which will occur by chance and you will find yourself making decisions you might not have otherwise made [1]. My life has had its share of happenstance. I do not take this lightly, because of several of the happenstances I have benefited greatly.

During my graduate program, I was awarded The African- American Doctoral Fellowship. The purpose of this fellowship was to try and retain doctorate students in the state of Mississippi after they received their degree to prevent the state from becoming a mind drain state. Once I graduated, I was obligated to stay in the state of Mississippi and work for a year; this was not an issue for me. I was born, reared, and received all my education in Mississippi. Mississippi was home for me.

Being the first out of nine siblings to attend college afforded me the opportunity in many ways to become a trailblazer within my own family. I am what you would call a first generation college graduate. I have had lots of experience charting unknown territories. Looking over my career, I thought it would be a good idea to speak about what life in academia has been for me. Personally, I often wished I would have had some signposts and notes along the way, directing me which way to go, whether to turn right or turn left. I wanted to know how to avoid the potholes, detours, and road bumps along the journey of the academia. There is strength and growth in firsthand experiences and it definitely builds character. When you are on the road to tenure there is very little margin for errors.

My parents gave me many words of wisdom to sustain me and build my moral character. I do wish I could have gone behind the black curtain, of what it meant to be tenured, or had some sort of blue print for what it looked like up close and personal. You do the best you can with what you have. Writing this article is my way of reaching back to give back to those who are coming behind me, by providing some advice as to how one can navigate the terrain of promotion and tenure. Many times, students are fresh out of their doctorate program and they are just so excited about their first job. Many things fall by the wayside; being a professor is what seems to matter most. Even though you might be at a teaching university versus a research university; guess what, you still need a plan of action as to how you plan to successfully obtain tenure. The type of university you are employed with will dictate how the tenure and promotion process unfolds.

This article is written to provide a broad brush overview on some things you will find common across most universities. Honestly, every bit of helpful advice one can get to be a successful candidate for tenure would be worth its weight in gold. We all can attest to the fact that lack of knowledge can leave you sadly disappointed, mistaken, and headed down a road of disaster. Yes, there have been many who have not gotten tenure at one university, but were very successful in obtaining tenure at another university.

Certainly, there is something to be said for learning by trial and error. There is no such thing as a one size fits all programs when it comes to being awarded tenure; however, what can be said is that there are some common threads that run throughout the halls of academia. Unfortunately, this is not an article which will tell you about some secret sauces, sprinkle fairy dust, or magic portions. It is one designed to educate, equip, elevate, and enlighten you about the process of tenure. Please understand I will be speaking out of my own personal experiences.

Below is a list of twenty- five items which you can place in your tool kit on your way to becoming a tenured faculty member. Oh, how I wished that my mother could have shared these ideas with me. I say this because my mother was the individual I spent many hours talking about how to cross bridges in my life. Well, I guess there will be some bridges in life your mother just will not be able to help you across. Below are the twenty-five things I wish my mother could have shared with me.

1. **Decide On Your Research Agenda Early**-Read existing journal articles to get a taste for what stirs your soul. Collaborate with your colleagues because you will discover you have mutual interests and may consider working together. Maintain a relationship with faculty you had during graduate school. They can provide valuable assistance with helping you develop and provide clarity to your research agenda.
 - A. **Start Writing:** You perhaps have heard the cliché “publish or perish.” The question then becomes what, where, and when should I publish. I say start writing now. The discussion often comes up about quality versus quantity. Obviously, you do not want to release literature you are not willing to stand behind. Academia is extremely busy so you will never have enough time, nor will there ever be the right time. The reason I say start now is because writing can be a laborious process. No matter how good a writer you may think you are, research journal editors will introduce you to new writing standards. There are so many moving parts to pulling an article together for submissions. The process can take anywhere from six months or even a year before you hear whether your paper has been accepted or rejected.
 - B. **Use Your Dissertation:** Your dissertation is an excellent starting point and a great source of research material ready to produce articles. Many people are publishing and turning their dissertations into books. Do get as much mileage out of your dissertation as you can. It is a great way to get published in peer review publications.
2. **Identify Your Publishing Play Grounds:** Select at least four- to -seven journals you would like to publish in; this will offer you some diversity in your options. Also, be willing to publish in open access journals.
3. **Keep A Paper Ready:** Keep a piece of work you are working on ready at all times. This will allow you to work in your down time or slow going moments. Trust me, you will have them. Having projects you are currently working on keeps the momentum and creative juices flowing. Additionally, it places you in the position to be able to continuously submit articles for publishing.
4. **Build Your Bounce Back Muscles:** Prepare yourself for when you get an article returned that needs corrections or might get rejected. No, matter how good you think the article might be or even if your colleagues have told you this one is a winner! Be prepared to dust yourself off and accept the recommendations. Resubmit the article to the same journal, if you like, or send it to another publication. Whatever you choose, do resubmit immediately.
5. **Join A Writing Group:** Check to see if your university has a writing group and join. You will discover having someone to write with as well as having an accountability partner is extremely helpful. You will be able get a lot more accomplished than if you would try to go at it alone. Start a writing group if your campus does not have one; the benefits far outweigh not having one.
 - A. **Create a Non-Negotiable Time, Place, and Space for Your Writing:** You want to have a designated time you write. What you need to do is designate what day will be your writing day and take all other options off the table; it is a non-negotiable

writing day. Set-up your own writing space where you are able to fully concentrate and be at laser focus with little- to- no-interruptions. You will discover you are able to get a lot more work done.

6. **Combine Your Teaching, Service, and Research:** Combining your teaching, research, and service will synchronize your efforts. This will work very well for time management purposes. You will soon discover you do not have a great deal of time. In academia, time is an extremely valuable commodity so being able to maximize your time will be benefit to you.
7. **Familiarize Yourself With The University Tenure and Promotion Policies:** Knowing what is expected of you by your university is great way to start this process. Developing a strategic plan allows you to approach tenure and promotion in a very organized manner. Knowing what is expected of you allows you to set benchmark goals.
8. **Look at Previous Faculty Dossiers:** Check to see how others organized their tenure and promotion packages. You then will have access to examples of how to write a tenure narrative and organize your curriculum vitae. This will allow you to have a blue print for exactly what the tenure and promotion committee expects.
9. **Speak with Recently Tenured Faculty:** Speaking with faculty who has successfully achieved tenure gives you firsthand knowledge of the tenure and promotion process. This will give you a better understanding of the process versus receiving erroneous information from individuals who went through the process twenty-five years ago. Keep in mind things do change.
10. **Attend Workshops and Seminars:** Many universities sponsor workshops for junior faculty to assist them with the tenure process. Be sure you attend those events; however, if your schedule does not allow you to attend, check to see how you might obtain a copy of the information through a webinar or blackboard.
11. **Understanding Your Contract:** Make sure you understand your contract percentages. Knowing what is expected of you in the areas of teaching, research and scholarship, and service is extremely beneficial. Do not be afraid to negotiate your percentages. Typically, this would be something you should do during your initial employment offering. You want to make sure, realistically, you have enough time allocated to do what is expected of you.
 - A. **Exceed the Standards:** There are occasions when the universities will specifically delineate exactly how many articles they want you to publish yearly. For example, your university recommends two articles per year. My advice would be to publish three. One of my life' philosophies are to exceed the standards required and always be willing to go beyond the call of duty. You want to cover your assets (CYA).
12. **Recruit Dependable Graduate Students:** Graduate students are good resources to assist you with conducting, collecting, and analyzing data for your research projects. They can also assist you with your classes by serving as a teaching assistant. Many of them are looking for experiences which would assist them with admission to graduate school.
13. **Teaching Does Matter:** Do not believe the hype to focus all your energy on getting published and put your teaching on the back burner. Trust me, every institution wants excellent professors; so do students and parents. Be careful not to spend all of your time trying to get published so that your teaching will not end up on life support. You might not be able to be the rock- star teacher you would like to be as you are navigating the terrains of tenure. Do keep in mind your teaching evaluations count. They can make a huge difference in whether or not your university keeps you prior to making it through the tenure process.
14. **Request A Consistent Teaching Schedule:** Work with your Program Coordinator or Department Chair while you are in the tenure pipeline to maintain the same teaching schedule. This will allow you to spend your time developing your area of expertise. You will discover your Program Coordinator and Department Chair are your best advocates during the tenure process. Do not be afraid to seek their support.

- 15. Avoid Teaching New Courses:** You will want to stay away from having to develop new courses during the first few years of teaching. You are learning the lay of the land and do not want to get drawn into spending all your time and energy in preparing new courses. Do not be deceived because this will take a huge chunk of your time, especially if you plan to do a good job, which I know you will. Being good at teaching is a great way to build rapport with your students and the rest of the faculty in your department. Yes, it is an awesome idea to create new courses; however, I strongly recommend staying away from this until you are awarded tenure. As stated, teaching is valuable, but at the end of the day, the tenure and promotion committees are going to be looking for your publications.
- 16. Apply for Grants:** Yes, apply for funding no matter how big or small the grant may be. Having grant money will give you some flexibility in being able to conduct your research. Also, you will be able to purchase some additional office equipment, supplies, attend conferences, hire graduate assistance(s) and purchase release time which would allow you to carry out your grant proposal.
- 17. Be Proactive in Seeking Feed Back:** Do not be afraid to approach the Department Chairperson, the Dean, and other colleagues about providing you feedback regarding how well you are doing or what are some areas you might need to improve. Be proactive because your colleagues can get busy caught up in their own work world and forget to seek you out. You have to be the one to make this happen. Remember after all that this is your career.
- 18. Establish Healthy Boundaries:** I know you feel like you are the new kid on the block and you want everybody to like you. You will find yourself saying “Yes” to projects and events, which might not otherwise be of interest to you. You so badly want to go along to get along. Well, you have to take care of your time; otherwise, you will get reeled into many other tasks leaving very little time to get what you need to get done. Do not be afraid to say “No”. Prioritizing, organizing and guarding your time are your responsibilities.
- 19. Limit Your Committees Services:** You will be asked to serve on committees, but do your best to pick those you have the most passion for. Select a minimum of two no more than three. Committees are great and they will allow you to display your talents, support your department, school and university on a larger scale. You are able to meet people across campus. Be careful not to overburden yourself with committee work so that you do not have time for anything else.
- 20. Be A Team Player:** People love working with people they can get along with and who have a pleasant personality. Your peers will be voting on you. They will decide if you are a good candidate to keep around. Having good soft skills is what got you the job in the first place.
- 21. Educate Your Colleague:** I am, by no means suggesting you put on blast everything you are doing. Highlight your accomplishments so that others will know what you are doing. They need to know that you are not sitting around biting your fingernails. Be willing to go to lunch and spend some time outside of the office with your colleagues. This will allow you to get to know your colleagues while they are getting to know you better. Remember, many of them will be serving on your promotion and tenure committee.
- 22. Develop a Tenure and Promotion Career Plan:** Once you have read the faculty handbook and spoken with others about the tenure process, establish a clearly defined work plan for the next five years. This will consist of measurable definable goals that you would like to accomplish in the areas of teaching, research, scholarship, and service. This guide will give you an idea of where you are and what you need to do to get where you would like to be. Keep in mind this is a living document; it is not written in stone. Please feel free to make whatever adjustments you warrant are necessary to keep you on the right track.
- 23. Get a Mentor:** Do not go through this process alone. Get a mentor, someone who is willing to support you, spend time with you, and assist you throughout the process. Ensure that this relationship is a good match, as you will be spending a great deal of time together and working on projects. Be sure this is someone who has your best interest in mind. Consider having at least two mentors. Also, consider reaching out to faculty at other universities.

- 24. Present at Conferences:** Identify conferences you would like to present at so you do not miss the proposal deadline for submission. This is a good way to network and meet other scholars who are doing the same work you are. It can open doors for opportunities to work with other people outside your university. There is nothing like team work. Take what you are presenting at conferences and make it publishable if you have not already done so. Additionally, this is a great way to stay abreast of the latest research, policies, and changes in your field. After all, you are supposed to be the expert.
- 25. Decide Early if Tenure Is For You:** Yes, this will be a lot of work, so it is important that you decide early on whether this is something you want to pursue. Live a life of passion and be passionate about the life you are living. Life is too short to be spending it doing something that really does not interest you.

Psychologist Carr [2] coined the term pre-tenure anxiety syndrome. He recognized this as an illness faculty members suffer when they are embarking upon the path of tenure and promotion. He identified the following as symptoms to watch out for; inability to sleep, frequently checking e-mails to see if a manuscript has been accepted or rejected, persistent feelings of not feeling good enough, guilty feelings of having to work weekends, and inability to maintain a healthy nutritional diet, and inability to maintain an exercise program. There is no diagnosis in the DSM-V by this name. As a counselor educator, I am big on self-care. I strongly believe if you are not able to take care of yourself, then it is highly unlikely you will be able to care for those around you.

After reviewing, the twenty-five items, you are probably wondering: will I be able to sleep, have time for my family, friends, and some “me” time. Keep in mind that many have already accomplished what looks like herculean tasks! I do strongly recommend building a community of people who are willing to support you along this journey. In addition, it will be very beneficial for you to take the time to educate them on what you are doing, and why you are doing what you are doing. This will allow for them to not feel neglected or abandoned when you are not able to participate in various family and/or social events.

Please, by all means do not allow life to pass you by during the time you are seeking tenure. You want to be able to get tenured, but do not allow tenure to get you. What I mean by this is that you do not want your life to be so centered on tenure that you miss out on life. Holloway [3] points out fifteen amazing tips for maintaining work life harmony. In her article, she discusses the importance of taking care of oneself and taking mental breaks. The desires to be successful and obtain your life goals can be extremely rewarding; but, try not to be so hard on yourself when you have done all you can and things do not quite work out the way you planned them.

Much of what you have read might not be applicable to your current situation at your university. I suggest you glean what you can from this article and share with someone else who can reap the benefits. There is no such thing as a magic recipe to obtaining tenure; however, what I will say is, there is a method to the process and if you are willing to put forth the effort then you can make this dream a reality for you.

Lastly, I would like to leave you with my seven “P’s” for promotion and tenure (1) Pray Always, (2) Persevere to the end, (3) Persist beyond measure, (4) Push daily, (5) Patience comes with time, (6) Prepare your plan, and (7) Practice what you want in life. Take this list of twenty-five items you wished your mother had told you and combine them with the seven “P’s” for promotion and tenure and I believe you can and you will make it happen. Yes, yes, and yes! Best wishes!

Conflict of Interest

It does not constitute a conflict of interest for the authors.

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