

Mara L. Houdyshell

Ten tips toward tenure

Advice for the professional journey

The day I received my letter of recommendation for tenure and promotion, I was surprised. Surprised, but not for the myriad reasons one might conjure. While I was fairly certain that the outcome would be positive, there was still that last bit of nagging doubt until I saw it in print.

When the letter arrived, naturally I felt relief; I felt happy. But there was another feeling that I hadn't expected. I felt like I belonged; the kind of belonging that a child feels when they are invited to come and sit at the adults' dinner table. I felt taller and suddenly more responsible. I even felt smarter (that feeling was temporary). I also felt a little bit sad, sad because a clearly delineated period of early-career stage martyrdom had come to a close.

The attainment of tenured status left me newly awash in nostalgia. I had experienced a similar feeling while attending library school. With the granting of tenure, those memories came flooding back.

While studying for my MLS at the University of California-Los Angeles, I was also a library support staff member at California State University, Northridge's Oviatt and South Libraries. I vividly remember how it felt to be a part of one peer group while actively studying to join another. Achieving tenured status was similar; it was a tangible transition on my chosen career path. Achieving tenure meant that I once again, had to separate from a group that I had belonged to.

The best metaphor I have been able to attach to the "finally tenured!" portion of my reaction is that it was much like being a guest in someone else's house for several

years (always minding your "Ps" and "Qs"), then finally having the homeowner tell you that you can live there on a permanent basis. Suddenly, it was all right to settle in on the couch, take my shoes off, and put my feet up on the furniture—for at least five minutes, anyway.

With tenure came something else I hadn't expected, a change in how peers perceived me. Long-time librarian faculty members were congratulatory, or at least accepting of my newly tenured status. There was nothing unusual about that.

What I hadn't anticipated, however, was the "awe" factor of my still untenured colleagues. They began asking me about how I did it, as if there was some rich secret that I could reveal. Their reaction caused me to repeatedly check up my sleeves and in my pockets for some hidden magic of which I was unaware. Had I missed something?

While I hadn't particularly pictured myself as a role model in the tenure process, the quizzings of untenured librarians did set in motion thoughts of creating a list of desirable, and positive, tenure-track traits. If such a list could be constructed, it might give untenured faculty some guidelines to consider and adapt for their own use.

Since it never hurts to have a starting point when building a better mouse trap, I embarked on a journey of retracing my professional pre-tenure steps. Those steps (tips) are listed below, and while not all-

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inclusive, I hope that they are of value to those still climbing the tenure-track ladder.

Ten tips

1. Be reliable, flexible, and professional. People appreciate it.

2. Establish a rapport with your librarian colleagues and library dean (or director).

3. Pay attention to your department and institution's guidelines for tenure. Sometimes this means learning to read between the lines of your evaluations, as well as seeking clarification(s). If it is suggested that you do "x, y, and z," in a particular review, don't fritter away the time leading up to your next evaluation mulling over what you *should* do, do "x, y, and z."

If publishing is a requirement for tenure, publish. Consider asking a trusted colleague to read a draft of your work before sending it out for review. They may have valuable suggestions for revisions or provide a perspective you had not previously considered.

4. Ask questions. Do not assume or be afraid to seek clarification about your role and responsibilities, library policies, or determining priorities. In some instances, it may be appropriate to seek input from more than one individual.

5. Get to know library support staff and respect the work that they do.

6. Join committees beyond the library, establishing personal contacts on campus will help you in ways not yet anticipated.

7. Dare to be yourself . . . within reason. It took me a long time to realize that people liked, or at least understood, the basic "me" just the way I am. This does not preclude you from continuing to strive to be a better "you."

8. Be creative. Share your skills and ideas, particularly ones that may not be directly linked to the profession, yet can be incorporated into it. If you are a writer, singer, artist, etc., consider novel ways to incorporate at least their spirit into what you do every day.

9. Don't whine (too much). Or at least put your whining in context. If you have a concern or complaint, be prepared to offer ideas or possible solutions that address it.

10. Do the unexpected every now and then. Examples: take part in campus events that do not always have librarians as participants or volunteer to take on a responsibility that is new to you and is one that others might not have quite pictured as being "up your alley."

While the trek to tenure may seem long and challenging at times, there are signposts, replenishments, and rewards to be found along the way. These will provide you sustenance, even when the tenure path seems rocky and unstable. Be open to new ideas and approach them with optimism and creativity. Demonstrating flexibility, conscientiousness, and careful adherence to tenure guidelines will help ensure that your transitional journey will conclude on a positive note. Savor and celebrate that moment—then get back to work. ♪

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