Tenure Dossiers: Strategies for Success
A Panel Discussion on November 11, 2008*

Tenure as a Process

• **Tenure is a process, not an event.**
  It starts the day you come to campus, and you have to be proactive in this process. Each pre-tenure faculty member should take a look at a tenure file to see how a successful file is put together, what documentation is needed, and how to write convincing statements. Some departments share such tenure files with new faculty. If your department does not, ask someone who has recently gotten tenure to read theirs.

• **Know what your rights are when you go into the tenure process.**
  Find out as much as you can about what counts, what is expected. Don’t accept the first answer you get—ask many people and triangulate. Find out what recently tenured people did. Do not stop there, but keep asking questions along the way.

• **Ensure that you get an annual review with your chair.**
  Some departments do this as a matter of course. If you are not in a department with such traditions, ask the chair to meet with you over your dossier.
  - Prepare your dossier for each annual review—it should be an evolving tenure file that grows over the five years you have before tenure.
  - Try to get a written record of your annual review from your chair so that you have something to work on. If the chair writes a “fluff” piece, try to get him or her to fill in specifically what you need to do to improve.

• **Make sure that you get good information after your 3rd year review, preferably in writing.**
  Chairs should be working to make 3rd year review letters more meaningful—the letter should show any weaknesses during the review so that you can work on it before tenure time.
  - If your chair said “everything is fine” that’s not enough. Find ways to get additional information from your chair so that you can fix anything that came up in the conversation about your dossier.
  - If there are not concrete suggestions for you in the 3rd year review, take it with a grain of salt—it may be a puff piece because people have a hard time giving negative reviews. A good 3 year review is not a guarantee there will be no problems at tenure time. Ensure that you get accurate information regardless of the letter the chair writes.
**Framing your Tenure Dossier**

- **Frame your statements and your dossier for two different constituencies:**
  - Your faculty in your department or division and other faculty in other departments if you do collaborative or interdisciplinary work.
  - External people who will write your letters. Ten to fifteen people from your discipline nationally will be asked to write letters in your support. These are considered your external peer group. Make sure such people know your work, present at conferences they go to, send your papers and grant applications to them for informal review. They need to know you as a scholar BEFORE they are asked for letters for your tenure file.

- **Understand the diversity of audiences for your dossier**
  You’re not just talking to external reviewers but also to your colleagues and those who will be on the ad hoc committee and those on FACTA who don’t know your field. Going into the nitty-gritty of your research in detail won’t make arguments with these people.
  - Your statements should convince external people in your field that you know what you are talking about. But understand that many people who are not directly in your sub-discipline will read and evaluate your dossier. They need to be able to understand why your work is important to the field, how it advances knowledge in your field. They will not be able to understand the technical details of your work, and will not appreciate being forced to read about them.
  - Have several people read your file before you submit. Make sure some are from your field and some are not. Listen closely to their experience of reading your file and their advice. You are aiming at creating a dossier that everyone can read and appreciate.

- **Do not neglect your teaching portfolio**
  The teaching portfolio is important! Build it with care, as much care as with your portfolio on research. Many junior faculty don’t see the importance of this because they have heard they must concentrate on their research. A strong research record is essential. However, a teaching record that shows you care about teaching well and that you’ve worked at it is also important.
  - Show the changes you have made to your syllabi over 5 years to document change and evolution. Keep all your teaching evaluations and show how you’ve responded to them. Keep examples of student papers and projects as examples of what you inspire students to achieve.
  - If you have a challenge in teaching—a course that is not working well, seek help with it and document what you have done to improve. Working toward improvement looks good in your files. Describe: What did you do to work on the problem? The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Weiss Fellows are resources for advice on your teaching.
  - At Cornell half the teaching is below average—so how can you show your commitment to your students? You may not be the best teacher at Cornell, but it is important to show what you have done to improve, what shows your commitment.
What can go wrong

• **Do not wait too long to publish** (even if you’re working on earth-shaking discoveries)
  In the sciences, negative decisions on a tenure case are often made because the candidate waited too long to submit the work he or she has done at Cornell for publication. Twenty publications from your postdoc fellowship don’t guarantee a positive decision. Reviewers are looking for what you did here. They will look for evidence that you have become independent of your advisors and have your own research direction. A big flurry of submissions right before tenure review sends a red flag to the committee—it doesn’t show commitment to scientific work and looks like you’re only submitting articles because you want tenure.

• **Don’t view tenure as a terminal event**
  To the institution, the act of giving tenure is based on the promise of future productivity. The candidate who regards the tenure process as a terminal event is making a big mistake! You need to map out where your research is going into the future, how you have started down a longer, productive path, what you will bring to your discipline and your institution in the future.

• **Submit high quality work**
  In disciplines where a book is the coin of the realm, a manuscript that is not published and still has errors in it is a problem. Make sure to submit writing that is of high quality, even if it is not published yet (for example, if it has been accepted, but is not out). Do not submit preliminary work that can reflect badly on you.

• **Use the tenure clock, not your grants as a timeline**
  Often, the grant cycle is problematic for junior faculty. If an enterprising young faculty member submits a proposal in first year for a large, 5 year grant, and gets the grant, the temptation is to use the grant deadlines as the criterion for when to publish results—as if one needs results only for the next grant. But the real clock is the 6 year tenure clock: you need to have papers out well before the 5th year when you submit your tenure file.

• **Understand the tenure clock**
  People hired in midyear get confused about the tenure clock. Be aware that you do not get the whole additional summer to get papers out! Your tenure clock begins when you reach campus, even if it is at an unusual time compared to your peers.

• **Make sure your dept does not set you up to fail**
  For example, not teaching any large classes may be viewed as ‘protecting’ the faculty member. But it gives you no record of teaching undergraduates. You need the portfolio to document your work. Team teaching with a famous colleague does not help you: you don’t want to be someone else’s grader. You need to run your own classes and get students to know you. Be aware that your dept might give you bad advice.
• **Be careful of changing expectations**
  When an appointment of a faculty member changes in the course of the 5 years pre-tenure, or an out of the ordinary research leave is given, expectations are that in a semester when you’re not teaching you will produce more in research. Changes made at the department level, even when they look like they are helping you, are not always in your best interest. Check out possible consequences at tenure of any changes to your initial contract.

• **Be proactive if your dept culture is not supportive**
  It’s like going to doctor—get second opinions! Get feedback on things you need to know about. Ask questions. Do this aggressively and nicely.

**General tips for success (to work on all along the way!)**

• **Be able to identify your own strengths and weaknesses.**
  Have a clear vision of who you are, what kind of researcher and teacher you are. Try to work on your weaknesses and be able to put yourself into an appropriate context regarding both strengths and weaknesses. Failed cases often result from candidates who have unrealistic expectations—they thought they were better than they were, or they started a much bigger project than was possible to accomplish within the 5 year tenure clock.
  o Know who you are and what will be the field that you represent when you come up for tenure. Brand yourself, define yourself for your colleagues, have a ‘tag line’ or ‘elevator speech’ that describes what you do. Discuss with your chair and colleagues about how your contribution to the discipline will be defined at tenure.
  o Take one day a year: turn off the telephone, shut off the computer. And think about who you are, where you are going, and how you are going to get there. Write it down.

• **Be collegial**
  You can’t just do your own stuff by yourself in your office or your lab—you have to get out and about in the department and the university so that you understand how the university works. You need to know more than just how tenure works.
  o Cultures within departments are remarkably different from one another and you need a view outside of your department in order to understand the university as a whole. Some departments have no formal or even informal mentoring, others are very intentional about these processes. Appreciate the culture in your department and understand that it’s not the same everywhere. Understanding your departmental traditions and climate can even help you to work to make your department culture more appropriate.
• **Understand that timing is everything**
  Tenure packages go in at end of 5 years, which is not a lot of time in a scientific research life.
  o Focus in part on research projects that will produce results within 5 year time frame. Do not abandon the important long-term projects, but make sure there is something to show at tenure time.
  o Listen to advice early enough so that you have time to change direction should that be necessary.
  o Don’t go up for tenure early—use the entire time you have to get tenure. This will help you to establish a strong record and make it more likely to succeed. Realize that if you go up early and do not get it, even if you then get it at the ‘normal’ time afterwards, your relationship with your colleagues can be damaged. It is not necessary to put yourself through such distress when you could simply be creating an excellent record for your only tenure bid.

• **Cultivate people—at Cornell and externally.**
  o Find ways to educate the senior faculty about your case (departments that do annual reviews of junior faculty understand more but you need to cultivate the senior faculty yourself in addition).
  o Cultivate external faculty: external writers’ CVs are put into your portfolio so that reviewers can understand their relationship to your work. Make sure you know the important people in your field: get invited to give talks, go to conferences, meet the important people and make sure they know who you are. Go to dinner with prominent guests that come to your department to get to know them. Make sure you have been invited to give talks at conferences and other universities. If necessary, invite yourself.
  o Make your grad students feel that you are supportive to them, and are helping them in their careers. Make sure they know where you are in the tenure process. Positive comments from grad students go a long way. Middle of the road comments do not help you.
  o Make sure your colleagues internally and externally understand your research at the level that they can articulate the importance of your research. Saying you’re the greatest is not helpful. Saying that your work is essential for making progress in this field and how it does that is important. Make sure people understand what you are doing and that you are engaged in your department, so those not in your discipline are engaged with you in the issues of importance to you.
  o Separate yourself from your advisor and your postdoctoral associates. You need to be able to make the argument that you are prepared for a career of leadership and service.
  o Be known in your community: be nationally recognized, go to national meetings, beg to be invited to give talks if that is what it takes, be assertive.
  o Make sure you have PhD students close to graduation at tenure time

• **Do the right amount of service**
• Don’t show hostility to service. Just do some of it and know you’ll be asked to do more after tenure.

• Women often get buried under service which doesn’t leave enough time for research. The trick is to find the sweet spot between being a good citizen and colleague, and not doing more than male colleagues are doing. Talk with your chair about standard expectations—do what is expected and no more.

• You’ll be asked to do very different service things. Don’t do the ones that just need a woman on the project. Do the ones with an intellectual, scientific component where you’ll learn what others on campus do. Choose service that is of interest or strategic value to what you do. Organize a visiting speaker series (gets you to know important people and how the university works) and sit on search committees to connect with colleagues on important issues.

• **Deal effectively with leaves**
  
  • You have legal rights to parental leave and you should know what they are and ensure that the people around you know what they are. Keep your lab and your research going when on parental leave. Make sure you discuss with your chair how much time you’re taking, what arrangements there will be for classes, how this affects your tenure clock. Make sure external people understand your situation. They may not know your situation and not understand what looks like ‘extra time’ you got toward tenure. Your statements in your dossier and your CV are entirely under your control—this may be where you can address any ‘extra’ time taken. Ensure that the chair mentions it in his letter of invitation to your external reviewers and in the letter he writes for review at the college and university level.

  • Research leaves are not paid for by Cornell—you would have to get your salary from another source. If you are applying for a research leave pre-tenure, talk to your chair and understand what the possible ramifications might be. How will they deal with the fact that you will be away and not teaching? What effect will this have on your tenure? Choose such a leave carefully—it needs to be in line with your intellectual development and “count” toward tenure in some way.

  • If taking an anomalous leave, offer to double up on teaching another semester. This will take any rivalry or resentment out of the ‘special’ relief you have gotten.

  • Medical reasons can result in teaching relief. Make sure you document everything—a medical leave shows up as if you didn’t teach enough during the time toward tenure. It looks to those who do not understand your situation as if you were 100 percent research for a time. Such anomalies make it hard for FACTA to evaluate your dossier. Be clear about what happened, so the medical leave does not raise research expectations unreasonably.

  • Keep asking your chair and committee within the department for advice on leaves and how to communicate about them. Decide if it is advantageous for others to know that you didn’t have as much time as someone else to get work done.
Questions asked at the session

• **Q: what is the process for my tenure document?**
  o You put your tenure dossier together, including research and teaching statements, an overall statement and documents supporting your case in teaching, research, service. You will already have seen others’ dossiers so you understand the structure. You prepare this early enough that others can read it before you submit.
  o You will submit a list of external reviewers who could fairly evaluate your case. The chair will have his or her own list and the final list of external reviewers is usually a mixture of the two lists.
  o The department discusses your case and puts the case together for your tenure to be sent up.
  o The chair writes a letter discussing the department’s case, and sends it to the assistant or associate dean in charge of tenure cases for the college.
  o The chair writes letters to the external reviewers to ask them for letters.
  o The assistant/associate dean writes a letter discussing the case.
  o The case goes forward to an ad hoc committee within the college which writes a recommendation on a course of action.
  o The case goes to FACTA, which is the university-wide advisory committee to the Provost on tenure and promotion decisions. FACTA recommends a course of action on the case.
  o The Provost adds his or her decision, after reviewing FACTA’s documents.
  o The case goes to the President, and finally to the Board of Trustees.
  o Your tenure is official when the Board of Trustees has approved it.

• **Q. If you get a tenure clock stop for a child, do you get compared to those you came in with?**
  NO.

• **Q. If I am serving on PhD committees, not as chair but just on the committee: Can I say no to such assignments? Where do I get credit for that?**
  o In some colleges that is not considered service, it’s considered graduate teaching.
  o Yes, you should be able to say no. Make sure you know what other assistant professors are being asked to do. If you’re being asked to do more than others, then it’s a good idea to say no, even if it feels awkward.
  o Find out what the average is and use it as a rule. Set a number based on the average among your peers and do that. Then this is not an arbitrary decision on your part, because you can your rule and it has a justification for it built in.
• **Q. What happens if, due to historical anomalies, others automatically got leaves I didn’t, and then I got it at a later time. It looks like a special leave, but it is not more time than my peers got. Will this make a difference?**

No, it is the flow of things over the 5 years of the tenure clock that will be taken into account. Such temporal anomalies are easy to understand if they do not add up to unusual amounts during your tenure period.

• **Q. What happens if the review process for an article is unusually long in my field—over a year long? In my case, after 10 months I had to withdraw an article in the hopes of finding a faster way to publish. Will the college and university take this into account?**

If it takes over a year for an article, and all 5 years you have been submitting and you can demonstrate that you have things in the pipeline all along the way, you should be ok. It’s the flow that is important. Also, if this is a disciplinary issue (as in social sciences) your peers will understand this as a common problem. Also understand that all the papers you write and put into your dossier will get read.

• **Q. I am going up for tenure early, in my 4th year. Is there anything I should be aware of?**

Asking for tenure early is risky, don’t do it if you can help it. Math, physics and astronomy do this more than other disciplines so it may be more accepted there, but if you can avoid it, don’t go up early. Discuss with the department chair what the best thing to do is in terms of when to come up. If it’s in the appointment letter that you will come up early, then coming up before the 6th year is not considered early. But it is still risky because there has to be enough evidence that you have good research and teaching at Cornell, and PhD students at Cornell that you are able to graduate.

• **Q. When is it a good time to stop the clock for maternity leave? If I stop it now, can I make my decision retroactive later? Will making it retroactive look like I’m taking tenure “early”?**

Do it now so that you have the choice of taking extra time later. When you are pregnant, you do not know what it will be like throughout the pregnancy or when the baby has arrived. You may not ‘lose’ research and teaching time, or you may. It makes sense to stop the clock right away, and discuss how this will be handled in the department with your chair. Remember that it is your right to take parental leave and stop the clock. If you decide later on that you do not need the extra time after all, it’s not the same as going up early if you still go up for tenure in the 6th year as had been previously scheduled when you were hired.

• **Q: what about cases where there is little teaching in the job description, but lots of extension or service or outreach?**

The Department chair will write a letter explaining your tenure case, the assistant dean will write a letter, the ad hoc committee will write a letter—each of those should include what your agreed-upon load is. You, your chair and your colleagues should know what the expectations are and how you met them. For example, if your load includes seeing animal patients in the vet school, be proactive about documenting how many clients you saw. Describe what the outreach
was that you performed, document and justify that whole area of your work. How many hours you spent, how many patients you saw, where you worked collaboratively or in the community.

• **Q: what does collegial mean? Making yourself known or does it also include collaboration? How is collaboration seen in tenure evaluation? Or do I not collaborate at all?**

There is much discussion about this in tenure meetings amongst faculty. There are three possible cases, only one of which is really good.

1. You have published only co-authored articles with people from your dissertation committee—that’s bad! This does not show that you have become a researcher and scholar in your own right.
2. You have only single authored papers—depending on the discipline, this is not as bad but also not good! Especially in the sciences where collaboration is expected and the norm.
3. In between—are you independent researcher (some single-authored papers)? Are you collaborative—do you work with peers on important questions? What was your contribution in the co-authored papers? Independence plus collaboration is best. Different disciplines have different rules for this. Inform yourself about your discipline.

One way to collaborate/be collegial with your departmental peers is to ask them to read your papers and comment on them. They don’t have to be actual research collaborators, but they can give good advice. Collegiality = being known and understood by your colleagues. Being off in a room by yourself for 5 years won’t get that done.

• **Q. How do I make clear what my contribution was in my various collaborations?**

Use your research statements to describe your role in the research. Make it clear what you have contributed.

• **Q: Does it make sense to get a letter from a collaborator on my role and contribution?**

A collaborator could be an external referee, but the request comes from the chair, not from the candidate. The department asks people to write letters, not the candidate. Usually the candidate submits a list of names and the department comes up with its own set of lists and then a combined list is drawn up from those sources. It’s considered bad form for you to contact an external person. You could, in putting the list together ask an external person if it’s ok to put them on the list? But that is not Cornell procedure—it’s different at other universities.

• **Q: can I put co-authors on the list for external referees?**

If some collaborators are on the list, that’s fine, but your list should not be entirely such people. There should also be ‘disinterested’ people on your list or it will not be taken seriously.

*Panelists included:
Martha Haynes is Professor in Astronomy and has served on FACTA, (the Provost’s advisory committee on tenure and promotion decisions). Each year, FACTA reviews 20-30 tenure dossiers. Martha has also served on ad hoc tenure committees in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Paul Kintner is Professor in Electrical and Computer Engineering and has served on FACTA.

Rick Harrison is Chair of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, a department split between CALS and Arts and Sciences. He has served on FACTA and on 3 appeals committees for faculty who were denied tenure.

Rosemary Avery is Chair of Policy Analysis and Management, an interdisciplinary department. She has acted as chair for 12 years and put through 14-15 tenure files. Rosemary has also served on FACTA where she reviewed 20-30 more tenure files with recommendations to the Provost.

Elizabeth Adkins-Regan is Chair of Psychology and has also acted as Associate Dean in the College of Arts and Sciences, with primary responsibility for decisions on tenure reviews in all fields in the College.