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“What It Takes to Get Tenure” – Perceptions and Experiences of AAEA Members

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JEL Classifications: I2, I23, J33, C8

Keywords: Mentoring, Performance indicators, Promotion, Self-motivation, Tenure

Tenure – the Hallmark of U.S. Higher Education

The tenure process—the hallmark of the U.S. higher education system—is under threat. Some pundits are asking, “Should tenure for college professors be abolished?” (Wall Street Journal, 2012). While critics of tenure argue that it creates a system that rewards research over teaching, proponents of tenure say tenure is the only way to preserve the quality of higher education by giving professors the freedom to pursue groundbreaking research that advances knowledge (Wall Street Journal, 2012). Once a beacon of academic freedom and a premier tool for recognizing and rewarding excellence in academe, the tenure system and the institutions built on it are facing increased challenges (Faria and McAdam, 2015).

Let’s first consider the current tenure system and why tenure is so important to the U.S. higher education system. Traditionally, professorial faculty were hired on the tenure track; after a probationary period of six successful years, they were tenured, which ensured lifelong employment. This tenure system contrasted the unstable or fixed-term employment situations of part-time faculty and full-time lecturers and instructors. Furthermore, the traditional evaluation of professors was based on research productivity, teaching effectiveness, and service fulfillments. In recent years, there has been a continuous decline in tenure-track positions, with some institutions creating career paths for non-tenure instructional faculty (Zhang, Ehrenberg, and Liu, 2015). This means that the job market has become very competitive for PhDs looking for tenure-track positions—they may compete in a candidate pool of 500–1,000 other applicants.

During the last quarter-century, there has been a noticeable shift toward temporary professional faculty, predominantly engaged in teaching activities, which most prominently occurs at the level of assistant professor (Zhang, Ehrenberg, and Liu, 2015). Various factors have contributed to the decline in the percentage of tenure-track or tenured faculty from one-third to one-quarter of the instructional workforce in U.S. higher education (U.S. Department of Education 2016; Helms, 2015). The most notable factors include budget cuts, general trends in the economy toward more flexible working arrangements, changes in student enrollment, and greater specialization across institutions in terms of staff profiles (Faria and McAdam, 2015; Altbach, 1999). The increasing demand for college education across the United States has led to a growth in the number of institutions with varying curricular specialization and length of degree programs, such as community and technical colleges. More recently, new technologies have revolutionized college campus teaching with online or distance delivery. These changes have further increased the divide between institutions whose primary mission is educating students and those striving for academic excellence in research (Helms, 2015).

Despite the increasing number of non-tenure-track faculty, the prestige and stability associated with tenure-track positions continues to make them especially attractive for graduate students entering the higher education job market (Helms, 2015). Proponents of tenure emphasize that it advances knowledge by providing scientists with the freedom to pursue groundbreaking research with a long time horizon and the ability to delve into controversial

issues. Tenure also provides faculty with security to challenge administrators and students. The high bar set by tenure requirements only retains the best professors, who then contribute to the quality of higher education in the United States (Wall Street Journal, 2012).

A Bird's-Eye View of Tenure and Promotion Requirements

Despite an extensive debate about the future of the tenure system and its policy framework—especially among economists (Wall Street Journal, 2012; Brusa, Carter, and Heilman, 2010)—several important questions remain: Has there been a generational change in expectations of what constitutes “academic excellence”? How is academic productivity currently measured? And does academic productivity go beyond journal publications? How could transparent performance criteria be set for those competing for tenure? Especially given the recent structural and demographic trends in the U.S. higher education job market, a bird's-eye view of experiences and perceptions among faculty currently in tenure-track or tenured positions is needed.

This article seeks to understand the key aspects of the tenure and promotion process. We designed a questionnaire to elicit respondents' perceptions about the evaluation of performance criteria and factors deemed important and relevant to obtaining tenure at their U.S. institutions. In addition, survey participants were asked to rank the significance of research, teaching, and extension/service factors for successful tenure and promotion. The survey asked questions about the nature of current appointments, tenure status, and demographic information. We were able to assess potential general changes in the profession by sending the survey to tenured faculty members, mid-career professionals, and faculty nearing the end of their careers or close to retirement. Thus, the survey aimed to assess participants' perceptions and experiences in order to understand differences between more recent and historical tenure requirements.

The Agricultural & Applied Economics Association (AAEA) represents a diverse group of academic sub-disciplines in agricultural and applied economics. This online survey was distributed via the AAEA listserv to all AAEA members. We emailed the survey link to about 2,600 AAEA members; we received 272 responses, with 248 surveys suitable for analysis, for a response rate of approximately 10%.

The Timing of Tenure Application Signals Excellence

About half of respondents had completed the tenure and promotion process, while the majority (53%) were “on the road to tenure” at a U.S. institution. “Old timers” with ten or more years of post-tenure experience made up 28% of the sample, and those who had obtained tenure either 4–6 years ago or 7–10 years ago accounted for 10% of responses. Another 10% of respondents had obtained tenure within the last three years.

A majority of participants (60%) indicated that their application for tenure had been submitted on schedule. Roughly one-third applied early (i.e., in less than six years) and 7% submitted their packages more than six years after their first appointment as assistant professor. The timing of the tenure application could be seen as a first benchmark of excellence, and many respondents provided comments that elaborated on the timing of their applications for tenure and promotion. Many of those who submitted their applications ahead of schedule had been recommended to do so by their department or through a transfer from another institution. Others reported a stellar publication record as their reason for “going up early.” Yet some respondents stated that their early applications had not been successful. In those cases, either early tenure was denied or they were granted early tenure but had to reapply for promotion at a later time. Reasons given for delayed applications were health or family issues, including having children while on the tenure track. Some also waited an additional year to improve their publication record, or a delay was forced upon them by unexpected changes in application procedures at their institution. Finally, a few respondents stated that they had been denied tenure at their first job and had to reapply at their second institution.

No Two Jobs Are the Same

As expected of a survey sent to all AAEA members in the United States, the nature of appointment percentages in teaching, research, and service/extension varied considerably. In order to examine these differences in greater detail, Table 1 presents distributions of appointments and different levels of tenure seniority and tenure-track faculty. As many economists have taken a particular interest in comparing pre- and post-tenure productivity (e.g., Faria and McAdam, 2015), Table 1 also includes respondents' perceived change in the actual distribution of their workload post-tenure.

Table 1: No one job is the same, distribution of contractual appointments, percentages shares*

Respondent Tenure Category		Contractual Appointment Split (%)					Appointment Change post Tenure (%)		
		Research	Teaching	University Service	Administration	Extension	Administration	University Service	Teaching
>10y	N = 69	40.73	33.93	12.76	32.95	37.57	31.88	34.78	10.14
	st. dev.	25.63	23.67	10.89	28.41	28.11			
7-10y	N = 12	45.25	33.91	8.33	7.50	40.60	5.80	13.04	4.35
	st. dev.	20.93	16.50	5.57	3.99	28.29			
4-6y	N = 11	40.66	31.15	3.99	11.09	25.50	5.80	7.25	5.80
	st. dev.	23.71	20.02	2.67	10.35	23.03			
<3y	N = 24	45.87	45.23	12.22	12.51	18.16	14.49	20.29	1.45
	st. dev.	24.41	31.37	9.22	12.77	19.24			
non Tenured	N = 132	55.86	42.48	6.31	3.28	25.24	NA	NA	NA
	st. dev.	34.45	27.25	4.24	3.19	19.81			

Note: *Shares do not add up to 100%. N = 248 respondents. Responses to "Appointment changed with tenure" are respondent's perceived percentage changes in time allocation towards different tasks. E.g. 31.9% of those tenured for more than ten years stated an increase in administrative duties.

On average, respondents spend roughly 50% of their time on research, 40% on teaching, and 10% on university service. Since considerable weight is placed on research productivity with regard to compensation, tenure, and promotion, tenure-track faculty appear to be allocating their time effectively. Those involved in extension programs report slightly different percentages, with an average of 30% (25% for non-tenured respondents) of their appointment spent working with stakeholders. However, the associated standard deviations are large. Across the board, administrative tasks take up about 15% of faculty members' time. When it comes to teaching, 30% teach 1–2 classes per year, while 25% teach 3–5 classes per year. Nine- or ten-month academic appointments were standard for 60% of respondents.

Obtaining tenure and promotion changes a faculty member's appointment. Administration and service are perceived to account for the biggest shift in workload. Interestingly, those granted tenure less than three years ago agree with the "old-timers" on the shift in workload toward administration and service. Table 1 suggests that the bureaucratic burden on academics accumulates over the course of one's career. Several survey respondents stated that being granted tenure had reduced their stress level. Several comments also pointed to a shift in research focus after tenure, when new opportunities to pursue different research interests became possible and the quality (rather than quantity) of publications became more important.

You Can Do It! – Support Matters

Successfully navigating the many challenges of tenure may require help and advice. Figure 1 summarizes how survey respondents ranked key "soft factors" (1=colleagues, 2=family, 3=mentor, 4=self-motivation, 5=finance) with regard to their importance to a successful tenure outcome. Each row represents respondents' rankings of a specific factor (numbered) within a category of questions, labeled A–F, for a total of 21 survey questions. Different

colored bars measure the percentage deviations in respondents' answers, grouped by their tenure (non-tenure) status, against the overall mean for each survey question.

Self-motivation was ranked as the number-one factor by 85% of respondents. The help and support of colleagues came in second (49%), while 29% indicated that the support of families was essential. Formal mentoring (available at many institutions) received highest ranks from 13% of respondents.

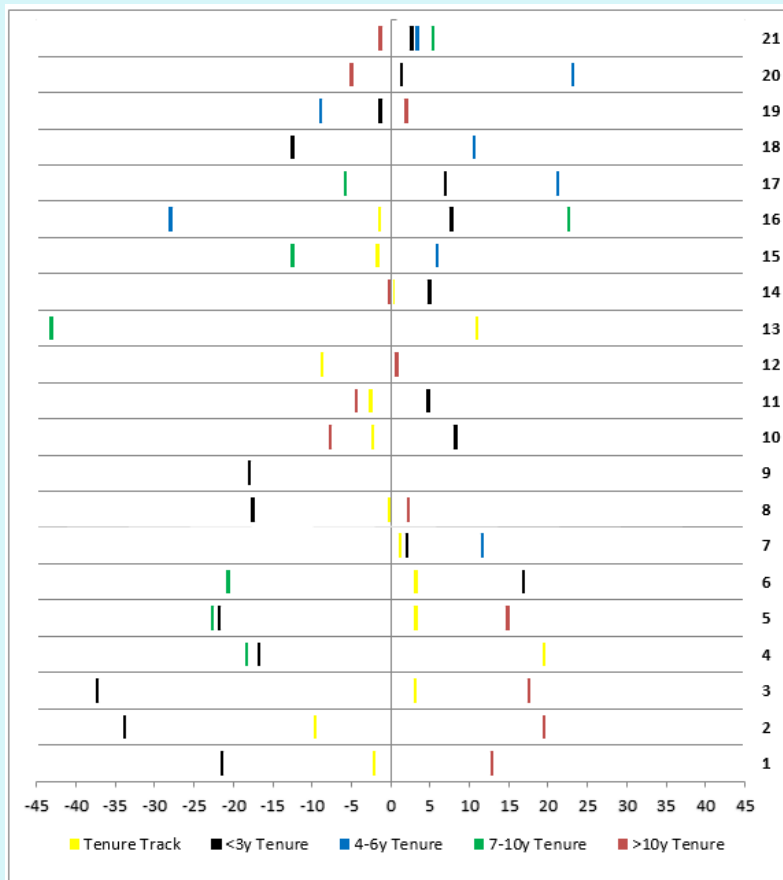
While the majority of those tenured for more than 10 years (red) stated that colleagues, family, mentors, and finances had mattered most, their younger peers—especially those tenured for less than three years (black)—believed the opposite to be true. For those tenured 7–10 years ago, self-motivation and financial considerations clearly did not matter much. Interestingly, those on the tenure track (yellow) thought that self-motivation was the one soft factor that matters, reflecting personal accountability in the prevailing “publish or perish” dilemma. The soft factors “colleagues” and “family” were ranked as less important.

Who Decides What Is Good Enough?

When asked about the hierarchy of decision-making power in tenure decisions at their institution (6=department, 7=chair, 8=college, 9=provost/president), non-tenured AAEA members appeared to be much less informed, or opinionated, than their tenured colleagues. The most decisive deviation from the mean was held by those recently tenured (<3 years), who stated that decision-making power predominantly rests with their department, while college or university administrators play a minor, or no, role.

The issue of clarity (question 10) is often closely linked to questions about the decision process. Specifically, this question asked about the degree to which procedures, rules, and requirements are communicated to, and understood by, tenure applicants. The survey results indicated that recently tenured individuals attributed a higher degree of clarity compared to non-tenured faculty. This finding signals a need for additional information for non-tenured faculty, in order to pave the way for a successful tenure application.

Figure 1: Not the same game, differences in perceptions of factors important to obtaining tenure at US institutions by tenured and tenure-track faculty members, percentage deviations from mean scores



Notes: A total of 21 survey questions were divided into A – E categories covering different factors deemed important to contributing to a successful tenure process (A, only tenured respondents): (1) Colleagues, (2) Family, (3) Mentor, (4) Self-motivation, (5) Finances. Tenure decision process (B): (6) Department, (7) Chair, (8) College, (9) Provost. Clarity of tenure requirements and process (C): (10) Tenure process, (11) Research importance, (12) Teaching importance, (13) Service importance. Research performance criteria (D): (14) Publications, (15) Journal impact, (16) Journal mix, (17) Knowledge transfer, (18) Citations. Teaching performance criteria (E): (19) Student evaluation, (20) Teaching academic assessment, (21) Student contact hours.

What Matters Most?

Undoubtedly, the most debated question among academics is how individual performance factors are weighted in tenure and promotion decisions. In answering this question, respondents first ranked the significance of research contributions (11), teaching excellence (12), and service or extension commitment (13) as contributors to a favorable tenure decision at their university. Recently tenured faculty gave research contributions the highest rank and otherwise held views that closely mimicked the overall average. “Old timers” and non-tenured respondents disagreed slightly about the importance of research contributions. Those on the tenure track also ranked teaching slightly lower and showed the highest positive deviation on the importance of service or extension commitment. Tenured respondents in the 4–6 year and 7–10 year cohorts showed no deviation from the average for any of the three items. The exception came from the “old timers,” who had a decidedly negative ranking of service and extension commitments.

What Does It Take to Get Tenure?

Excellence in research is commonly associated with the steady production of high-quality journal publications (Green, 2008). Survey respondents were asked to rank selected performance criteria such as publications (14), impact factors (15), journal mix (16), knowledge transfer (17), and citations (18) in order of their importance.

While economists generally agree that peer-reviewed publications in high-ranking journals are most important to the evaluation of research productivity (Lutter and Schröder, 2016; Wall Street Journal, 2012; Green, 2008), survey respondents showed large variations in their rankings of what constitutes excellence in research. Only those recently tenured ranked the importance of publications higher than the average.

One interesting survey result was the opinionated responses of those in the 4–6 post-tenure category. In this group, the mix of journals ranked lowest among all groups, while knowledge transfer received a score roughly 20% above the overall average. Those in the 7–10 years post-tenure cohort also shared this viewpoint. Those tenured for less than three years ranked the mix of journals and knowledge transfer above average, whereas non-tenured deviated only minimally from the overall averages when it came to importance of components within research, a category they already ranked below average (Figure 1).

When it comes to teaching, respondents were asked to rate the importance of (19=student evaluation, 20=academic teaching assessment, 21=student contact hours) within the teaching category. Figure 1 shows that only those tenured for 4–6 years deviated from mean rank values when it comes to the impact of teaching assessments (23% above all others) and student evaluations (7% below). Tenure-track faculty did not appear to have any strong opinions on any of the teaching-related performance criteria.

Any direct comparison of ranking values and their respective deviation from the population mean scores needs to be performed with caution. First, not all faculty are the same. Respondents differ not only by experience but also by tenure status. Differences come about as a result of the nature of appointments (for instance, shifting focus and ranking weights toward teaching or service/extension for those in positions with higher teaching or extension loads). Second, perceptions of what matters may change over time, thus, making it difficult to compare the perspectives of recently tenured colleagues to those of the “old-timers.” Third, the survey included tenure-track faculty, who ranked key factors solely based on their perceptions vs. tenured faculty who based the ranking on their experiences. Last but not least, not all institutions are the same with respect to research intensity, specializations, and perceived rank according to a multitude of metrics.

Takeaway Messages

The results unveil information on important performance factors from recently tenured colleagues and pieces of wisdom from tenured “old timers,” which may support early career colleagues who are on the road to tenure.

First, the number and ranking of peer-reviewed publications were the two winning ingredients in the promotion and tenure portfolio. Thus, success in the tenure system is still perceived to be tilted toward the evaluation of research excellence, measured by publications in high-ranking academic journals (Lutter and Schröder, 2016; Wall

Street Journal, 2012; Green, 2008). Accordingly, the survey results show that non-tenured faculty members typically spend the majority of their time doing research. It seems the popular saying “publish or perish” may still hold true. Previous research has shown that the emphasis on peer-reviewed publications and their impact factors is strongly correlated with promotability (Salthouse, McKeachie, and Lin, 1978) and even suggests a positive correlation between spending more time on doing research and life satisfaction (Feld, Necker, and Frey 2015). At the same time, the focus on research may neglect the many other factors crucial to the performance review and tenure-decision process, such as high-quality teaching (Wall Street Journal, 2012).

This study provided insights into generational change in the tenure process. Understanding how the tenure system has changed is important for faculty serving on review committees, as they might comprise a mix of recently tenured, mid-career, or end-of-career faculty. In today’s competitive environment, the tenure track requires a balance of a multitude of requirements: numerous high-ranking peer-reviewed journal publications, large amounts of competitive external grant funding, excellent teaching evaluations, and a solid track record of service or extension work to various stakeholders. The tenure period is stressful and growing accountability during which former graduate students are expected to develop into respected experts in their academic field. This suggests that there are an increasing number of demands for a faculty member during the six probationary years on the tenure track, ultimately raising the bar to attain tenure. In order to assist young faculty members, more institutions now offer an option for new parents, caregivers, and faculty undergoing personal hardships to “stop the tenure clock.” Some institutions also strive to add transparency by providing “tenure roadmaps” to guide young faculty through the specificities of tenure guidelines and procedures (Helms, 2015).

The results support the argument that academics may become more risk-taking in their approach to research and publication efforts after the removal of tenure-track uncertainty (Wall Street Journal, 2012), as if they were ready to start exploring more long-term and controversial research issues. Furthermore, crossing the threshold to tenure was perceived to lead to higher demands for service at the university level, trailed by other forms of administrative duties. Senior tenured professors spend more time in administrative roles, service, or extension compared to recently tenured and non-tenured faculty. Teaching as part of one’s portfolio appears to be least affected by promotion.

While perceptions of “what it takes to get tenure” have changed, self-motivation and help/support from colleagues remain key ingredients for successful promotion and tenure. It is especially important for newcomers to tap their departmental network and ask experienced faculty, “What does it take to get tenure?” To that effect, the AAEA mentoring program established in 2012 and a recent grant from the USDA-ERS to the AAEA to support early career professional development with a focus on strengthening the skills of new members is definitely good news. The newly created AAEA Online Mentorship Portal, which connects young professionals with more than seven years of experience with mentees in the first five years of their careers, seems like a good investment in terms of fixing a possible “pothole” on the road to tenure. These AAEA resources create opportunities to share knowledge, experiences, and insights. As this study has showed, these relationships and contacts across the AAEA, academia, government, and industry top the list of most valuable tools or successful future careers, whether working at a land-grant university, non-land-grant university, in industry, or in government.

For More Information

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Acknowledgements: We would like to thank the staff at the AAEE office for supporting the member survey that forms the basis of this study. We appreciate the helpful feedback from leaders of the AAEE-Graduate Student Section- Aaron Ates, Clint Neill, and Josh Maples, as well as the suggestions and comments from several anonymous reviewers.

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