

# The Long Road to Tenure

## Lessons Learned from a Battle Wise Veteran

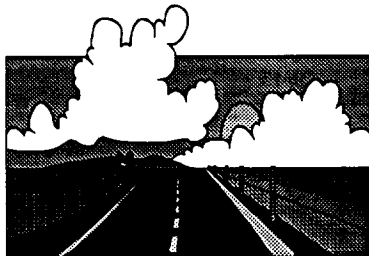
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### Introduction

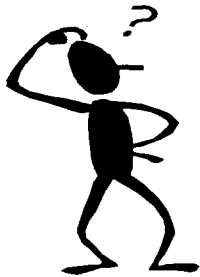
So you are thinking about a career in Engineering Education. You have probably completed at least four years of undergraduate education to obtain a Bachelor of Science degree. Further, you have probably completed your Master's degree in about one to two years. Now you might be completing or have completed your doctoral degree that has taken anywhere from three to six years. It would seem that you ready to enter the engineering education field. You have worked hard to prepare yourself for this career.

The reasons to enter the engineering education field are numerous. Perhaps you like being able somewhat set your own hours. Of course, you may enjoy working with students as they begin to climb the education ladder. Then maybe you are a person who wants to pursue research and hope that some day you would make a significant contribution to the community of scholars in your chosen field.

As you talk to many of your professors to seek their advice, you might begin to hear horror stories of that long road to the achieving of tenure. Obviously, a major goal in the pursuit of a career in engineering education is the achievement of tenure. Tenure is a major decision at all educational institution since it is in fact the granting of lifetime employment. For you to achieve tenure you will have to "jump through many hoops and climb numerous mountains".



Having gone through this process twice (this should give you an impression of the successfulness of the first time), the author of this paper would like to share some thoughts about how best to prepare for this challenge. Specifically, this paper will discuss ten pieces of advice that the engineering educator might consider in developing a strategy in preparing tenure applications.



### Tenure Strategy

#### Decide on what you want from your career

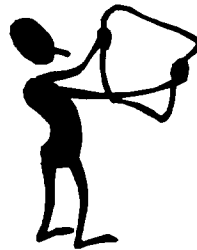
This is probably the most important step

in preparing for the long road to tenure. It begins before you even accept employment. One must ask oneself: what is it that you want from your career in engineering education? Do you want to do research and publications or do you want to work with students? Here one must be honest to oneself. It is important that you select the right institution for employment. If you want to work with students but select a research institution to work, the educator is probably doomed at the beginning. After deciding on what you want from your employment make sure that during the interview process that you ask questions that will indicate clearly what the institution considers important. In other words, an engineering educator can not afford at the start of his or her career to have a mismatch between their goals and the college.

#### Find out what your institution considers important.

After accepting employment always be alert to what the institution really considers important. Tenure is not a decision that a department makes; but in fact, it is a decision that the entire college or university community makes. At most institutions, the tenure decision process goes through numerous committees and administrators. Hence, one can feel that the department may value for example teaching, but the college or a particular administrator may value research funding. Keep in mind that all-educational institution obviously value excellence in teaching but many will only tenure individuals who have demonstrated excellence in scholarly activity. Watch closely tenure and promotion decisions. The educator can gain real insight into their institution by viewing this process and the decisions of the various players.

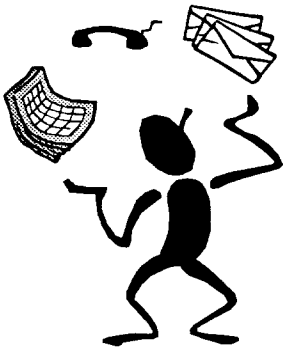
#### Plan your tenure



As the saying goes: "if you do not know where you are going any path will get you there" really applies to the tenure process. The new educator should work with essential individuals in their department to map out at the beginning of their career the steps that are necessary to achieve tenure. As

part of this plan, one must determine in advance yearly goals for scholarly activity, improvements and developments in teaching, and the amount of commitment to service to their institutions. This plan should be in writing with at least three years milestone measures. The plan should be flexible enough to account for changes in direction of the institution and changes in personal goals

## Know your strengths and weakness



One needs to make a careful assessment of both the individual's weakness and strengths. The three categories of teaching, scholarly activity and service are in generally the basis of tenure decisions at most institutions of higher education. An educator cannot ignore any one of these. It is very easy to fall into the trap of working in the areas of one's strengths while

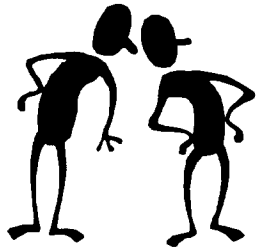
ignoring those areas of weakness. In other words if one's strength is in teaching by all means pursue this, but be careful that scholarly activity is not ignored.

### Do first things first

After one has developed a plan and as a part of this planning process sized up their strengths and weakness and then determined what is important, the educator should daily ensure that he or she is doing **what is important**. In other words, the new educator should become effective in the use of their time. This means that all their work time should be devoted to achieving their goal for tenure. If the institution rewards scholarly activity, it is a mistake to spend hours interacting with students or vice versa. The bottom line is that the new educator should do those things that have been laid out in their plan and not those things that they might rather do.

### Get a mentor

The road to tenure does not have to be a lonely one. The educator should look for someone preferably in their department to help them through this process. Many institutions routinely assign senior faculty to this role, but it is more important that the new educator find their own mentor. This individual should be willing to help, have a good understanding of the process, and be in position to help. This is particularly important at research institutions where contacts must be made to get funding for projects. As a final note, there are many professors willing to help young faculty in the process and failure to take advantage of this help can be fatal to a career.



### Collect data from the start of your career

This area is probably where many untenured faculty members make their biggest mistake. Evaluation for tenure and/or promotion appears to be a long way off in the future. As such many educators wait until the time to prepare their application documents to begin this collecting task.

A new faculty member should begin from the first day (and even possible before) of employment collecting exhibits. Any letter, memorandum, report, teaching evaluations, exit interview forms that document positive interactions with students and colleagues should be painstakingly file away. This is especially true with regards to annual evaluations performed by department heads and deans. Comments concerning research efforts and publications should be placed in writing and appropriately filed. Documentation on service with regards to academic committee that clearly demonstrate the contribution that the educator performed should be kept. As a final, note one can not overdue the collection of data.

### Work with your department head or chairperson at regular intervals

Working with your chairperson is important in ensuring that your efforts are being directed in the most positive manner. In general, your chairperson should have a strong understanding of the rules, expectations and most of all the politics involved in the tenure process. He or she hopefully will know the players that will be involved and perhaps have an understanding of what each of these players are expecting. Also, and importantly, your chairperson will be one of the first individuals who you will have to satisfy during the tenure process. It is true you could have your chair's support and still not gain tenure, but it is equally true that if you do not have your chairperson support you are less likely to gain tenure.

### Be aware of changing times at your institution and their implication

Be very careful about changes at your institution. There has been many departments that at one time might be stressing teaching and then due to a change of leadership either at the department or the dean level begin to stress research. One should try to foresee these changes coming and then make the appropriate correction in their planning process. Budget constraints can readily change the direction of a university. In other words, budget constraints can force academic leaders to seek educators who would attract outside funding as opposed to educators who are good in the classroom.



### Develop a network of support outside your institution

A valuable part of your portfolio for the tenure decision is written supports from colleagues out side your institution. As such it is important that you attend professional meeting to develop a network that can comment on your value to the engineering teaching profession. Send colleagues in your field copies of your research work so that they can become familiar with the type and quality of the work. Do not be shy in asking educators at other institutions to comment on the work. The bottom line is that you have nothing to lose by asking. As you

attend conferences and meeting make sure that you pass out your business cards and in turn make sure that you pick up business cards of professional that you meet.

### **What if the unthinkable happens?**

You have done all the above and you have worked hard to gain tenure. Despite this effort, you are denied tenure. Many times this is strictly out of our control. For example, during the year that you submit your tenure papers there could be a change in the leadership of the institution. Another reason could be limiting of the number of tenure faculty members or budget cuts. In fact, you join an elite crowd. For example, the well-known scientist Carl Sagan was denied tenure at his first teaching post.



Nonetheless, being denied tenure is very disappointing; however, it is not the end of the world. First if you are denied tenure then the institution has told you that what you are good at doing is not what they want. For example, suppose one wants to teach and interact with students; however, he or she is denied tenure because of insufficient research package. Being denied tenure gives one the opportunity (admittedly forcing this opportunity) to explore other institutions which would be conducive to the educator career goal.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In summary, this paper has proposed suggestions to help an engineering educator to prepare for the tenure process. This process can be quite extensive and require considerable amount of work. It is hoped that the ideas in this paper will help the reader plan and prepare effectively.

### **DENNIS J. FALLON**

Dr. Dennis J. Fallon obtained a Bachelor of Science Degree from Old Dominion University. He earned a Master of Civil Engineering and a Doctor of Philosophy from North Carolina State University. He has over sixteen years teaching experience and over twelve years industrial and commercial design experience. Dr. Fallon has received several awards for teaching including the Chi Epsilon James M. Robbins Award for Excellence in Teaching. In addition, he was co-recipient of the Thomas C. Evans Instructional Paper Award for 1990. He is presently the Department Head and Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina.