Acquiring Tenure in Engineering Technology

John W. Lipscomb, Jr.

Abstract

The process of passing the tenure test in Engineering Technology is often unclear to new faculty members. New faculty members are generally told that a successful tenure program requires a balance of several activities including teaching, research/scholarship, service. However, they do not often hear of the successes and failures of prior colleagues that may illustrate errors in achieving a good balance. Some of the errors during the critical probationary period are; unrealistic expectations of publications, poor student rapport, listening to the wrong people, chasing grant funding, and not becoming specialized. Suggestions to develop an acceptable tenure dossier in time are; start early, get a mentor, develop an area of expertise, be a team player, avoid inefficiency.

Introduction

Although this is not an historical document, it does include twenty-three years of the writer's experience at three universities from an instructor to a tenured professor in engineering technology. Lessons from the writers personal effort toward tenure and the successes and failures of colleagues were included in developing the stated opinions. In most universities, tenure involves an expectation of continued employment after a probationary period of acceptable performance. The probationary period, usually six years, generally requires the academic rank of associate professor and proficiency in teaching, research/scholarship, and service. Often a third-year tenure review is used for an early evaluation. Usually, the other tenured faculty and administrators perform the evaluation. After tenure is acquired, performance in teaching, research, and service may influence one's salary raises but usually not one's tenure status. Most tenure-track positions require good performance in teaching, research/scholarly activity with much less emphasis on service. A new faculty member may request to see dossiers of successful tenure candidates. The department may not furnish them but the individuals probably will.

Teaching

Quality teaching is very important and student evaluations are often used to measure it. Consequently, student satisfaction is an important part of acquiring tenure. Most engineering technology faculties want good teachers more than they want good researchers and scholars. A common error for new teachers is setting the academic level of the course to be too easy or too hard. Consequently, getting reactions from students early in the course can be helpful in adjusting the difficulty level. An example comes to mind of a new faculty member who was teaching control systems at too difficult a level. After the first test, the students who did not drop the course began meeting by themselves to work problems and learn the difficult material. The new faculty member became aware of this and started meeting with them. This essentially

changed the course from a three-hour lecture to a five-hour lecture with three hours of credit. The students appreciated his effort and so did the administration. Though the course was probably too difficult, the new faculty member made some points toward tenure with his enthusiasm toward teaching. If motivation is sufficient to cause the students to meet the standard, the result will be positive. If not, many failures and low student evaluations will occur. It is possible to teach at too low a level and insult the students. Although, the student grades will be high, student satisfaction and evaluations will be lower.

During the first year, a new faculty member will be heavily burdened with learning and/or creating new course material. Using one's industrial experience can provide a good foundation for teaching because many practical examples can be brought into the classroom. Students value these "real world" examples very highly. However, the expectation of student performance by industrial professionals can be quite elevated and result in overly high expectations of student performance. Interesting presentations and grading fairness are important for good student evaluations.

Research/Scholarship

For this discussion, research is defined as acquiring new knowledge through the scientific method, whereas scholarship is publishing in journals, books, monographs, and other means. An impediment to engineering technology research, even applied research, is the lack of graduate students, research equipment, and the master's degree as the terminal degree. Consequently, funding for most research is difficult to obtain. In engineering technology, funding for industrial training, certification courses, student scholarships and teaching equipment in easier to obtain than funding for any research. Although the requirement for basic research is minimal in engineering technology, applied research is appropriate and encouraged. Applied research can be independent study or industry oriented problem solving and does not require funding.

Scholarship involves not only publishing research results but publishing and presenting innovative technical and educational ideas. Consequently, scholarship involves a more realistic path to tenure for most engineering technology faculty than even applied research with published results. Moreover, in engineering technology, the amount of one's funding is not often used as a criterion for tenure. A trap exists for faculty attempting to acquire research funding. Many grant proposals may be written involving great ideas and funds. Unfortunately, unfunded proposals and unpublished articles are worth little in the tenure dossier. A similar effort toward articles in journals, proceedings, and presentations, would create a better dossier. More journal opportunities exist than funding opportunities. One revered tenured full professor comes to mind that was nationally known for scholarship and never obtained any funding in his long career. However, acquiring tenure without scholarship is probably impossible. Although less valued than refereed journal articles, presentations are another avenue of publication. Because travel to conferences requires expenditure, several papers should be presented. A one year time-lag is typical for both publications and presentations. Consequently, good scholarship effort during the first year in a tenure-track position is very important, particularly if a third year review is required.

To publish is to say something useful and hopefully new. This cannot be done without expertise in the topic. Thus, developing at least one area of expertise is critical for new faculty. Choosing

a good area is so important that an experienced faculty member should be consulted and perhaps used as a coauthor. Because not all submissions for publication will be successful, more articles should be written than are expected to be published. Publishing requires not only good ideas but reasonable speed. We educators are actually writing for a living and some of the tools are English composition skills, word processing skills, and typing skills. This writer learned to "touch" type in his fourth decade. A thought now appears magically as a sentence on the CRT. A former colleague believed that typing was secretarial work and thus beneath him. However, the "typing" faculty easily out paced him and the secretary.

Service

Often, new faculty members are encouraged to get involved in university and departmental committees, student organizations, student recruiting, accreditation activities and other services to the institution. These activities are important for being a team player and learning organizational politics. Service can also involve professional societies and consulting. However, these activities do not count much toward tenure and should be kept in perspective. More time will be available for this after tenure.

Distractions

Virtually anything except "publishing or perishing" can be considered a distraction. Even teaching which consumes too much time is detrimental. Several hours per week, perhaps one day per week, should be set aside to pursue tenure. This includes reading professional journals in the chosen area, conferring with colleagues, and typing. One's family should not be left out. Many divorces are the result of the tenure burden. A caring family can be a support during the intense and productive first years. Pursuing advanced degrees should be avoided unless it is a part of the contract for employment. A departmental chair or older colleague may request help with departmental duties such as recruiting, brochure construction, or new course development. As the "low man," some of this must be accommodated. However, it may become necessary to resign from time-consuming tasks to stay on the tenure track. When distracted with other duties, ask them to remember their first years in tenure-track teaching. It will be easy for them. They will be remembering the most intense years of their life.

JOHN W. LIPSCOMB, JR.
Dr. Lipscomb is a Professor in the School of Engineering Technology at the University of Southern Mississippi. He received the B.S. degree in Electrical Engineering, and the B.S. and M.S. degrees in Mechanical Engineering from Louisiana State University, and a Ph.D. degree in Higher Education from the University of Mississippi. He is a registered professional engineer. Address Correspondence to: Dr. John W. Lipscomb, Jr., PE, Box 9201, Hattiesburg, MS 39402. E-mail J.Lipscomb@usm.edu Office telephone (601) 266-4902