Winning Tenure in Geoscience Departments: Some Unsolicited Advice to Faculty Aspirants

Donald J. Siegel, Syracuse University

Every year, I externally review three to five tenure and promotion packages in the geologic sciences. Lately, I have had to write too many equivocal letters. Are our junior faculty deceiving themselves about what it takes to win a lifetime contract in academia?

When students apply to study with me for their doctorates, I ask them, “So when did you discover you wanted to be a writer?” They look blankly at me and say, “What?” They simply don’t have a clue.

Now faculty members are still told the falsehood by their administrators that tenure consists of three parts: teaching, research, and service. Winning tenure really is about getting external reviewers to say “yes” to the questions asked in cover letters soliciting tenure package reviews:

Would the candidate win tenure at your institution?

Does the candidate have a national reputation?

Is the candidate potentially an intellectual leader in their specialty?

The only way to receive a “yes” to these questions is to publish research frequently and to network in an almost Machiavellian way. Winning a teaching award means little, because there is no peer-reviewed “common currency” for teaching. In contrast, all institutions recognize papers in peer-reviewed research publications, such as Geology. Although laudable and necessary for the health of an institution, outstanding university service means nothing to anyone not from that school.

What is a tenure package that would prompt me almost always to answer “yes” to the three questions?

First, an applicant should submit at least one paper to a peer-reviewed journal every year for the 5 years prior to the tenure decision. Some papers should be submitted to geoscience journals if the applicant is part of a geoscience faculty. Meeting this requirement is hard! Research has to be carefully devised, organized, and paced. Do I philosophically agree that junior faculty everywhere should publish a paper a year to win tenure? Absolutely not, but I still have to answer those three questions. If a candidate does publish punctually, I can at least argue in terms of productivity. Publishing papers is the most powerful ammunition to advance a tenure case—period.

It can take 1½—2 years for papers to get into print from first submission. I ask junior faculty how things are going after they’ve had an academic job for a few years. Many respond, “OK,” except they have to get some papers out. I nod in agreement, but my junior friends are already lame ducks. Papers accepted for publication the year before the tenure decision lead to unfair accusations that they are in the “last gasp” of research productivity.

Second, the junior faculty member should win one large research grant ($100,000) from a peer-reviewed funding source (National Science Foundation, Department of Energy, Environmental Protection Agency, foundations). Being given money by one’s peers confirms the scientific merit of your research. Junior faculty members have trouble winning grants because they seldom get useful training in proposal writing. Postdoctoral experience is one way junior scientists can learn how to write proposals. Typical rejection rates for proposals are 80%, and junior faculty need tremendous self-discipline and willpower to hunker down and do what has to be done—rewrite and resubmit—despite being rejected.

Third, junior faculty should do professional society service work. For example, GSA and the American Geophysical Union are always looking for proposals to organize and chair special and topical symposiums at their national conferences. Organizing a topical session at a national professional meeting is the best way to spread your name. Invite major specialists in your field. They will remember your name if they are asked to review your tenure package. This relatively small amount of professional service shows your scientific community you wish to be a “player,” someone interested in your profession beyond your own institution.

I hope junior faculty will help me out and put together better packages to advance their careers. An attorney once told me he was astonished that junior faculty did not understand the academic game. He said that in law, junior partners are routinely fired after 3 years if they don’t bring in sufficient clients or win a sufficient number of cases. Professors don’t generally make as much as lawyers, but I for one, would not have had any other career, despite the hard work.


Related Events Scheduled for Boston 2001

Donald Siegel, Syracuse University, and Suzanne O’Connell, Trinity College and Wesleyan University, are offering a day-long short course at GSAs Annual Meeting in Boston. Sponsored by the Association for Women Geoscientists (AWG), “Surviving Academia—From Getting the Job to Winning Tenure” will be held Sunday, Nov. 4, 8 a.m.—4 p.m., Independence West Ballroom, Sheraton Boston Hotel. Cost: $20 (includes lunch, course materials). The course contains lectures on every aspect of making a successful academic career, and Siegel urges faculty aspirants to attend. Registration: Donald Siegel, disiegel@mailbox.syr.edu, (315) 443-3607. Also on Sunday (from 11 a.m.—1 p.m., Republic B Ballroom, Sheraton Boston Hotel) is a free, AWG-sponsored panel discussion, “Tenure and Promotion: Letting the Cat Out of the Bag.” Registration: Mary Ann Holmes, mholmes2@unl.edu, (402) 472-5211.

Comments on this issue may be sent to jhammar@geosociety.org or GSA Today, P.O. Box 9140, Boulder, CO 80301-9140.

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2. Does the candidate have a national reputation?
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The only one way to receive a “yes” to these questions is to publish research frequently and to network in an almost Machiavellian way. Winning a teaching award means little because there is no peer-reviewed “common currency” for teaching. In contrast, all institutions recognize papers in peer-reviewed research publications, such as Geology. Although laudable and necessary for the health of an institution, outstanding university service means nothing to anyone not from that school.

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Donald I. Siegel

*Donald Siegel is a Professor of Earth Science at Syracuse University (NY), past Chairman of the Hydrogeology Division of GSA and the Division’s 2001 Distinguished Service Awardee. At this year’s annual GSA meeting in Boston, Prof. Siegel and Prof. Suzanne O’Connell (Trinity College and Wesleyan University) are offering a day-long short course sponsored by the Association of Women Geoscientists; “Surviving Academia — From Getting the Job to Winning Tenure.” The cost is only $20/student, including lunch, course materials, and a panel discussion. The course contains lectures on every aspect of making a successful academic career and Siegel urges faculty aspirants to attend.*