



Published on *Inside Higher Ed* (<https://www.insidehighered.com>)

[Home](#) > Essay on how to earn tenure

Essay on how to earn tenure

Submitted by Mary Kirk on May 6, 2013 - 3:00am

One day while I was simultaneously earning my doctorate and teaching full-time as a lecturer in the Computing and Software Systems Program at the University of Washington at Bothell, a colleague's comments foretold my future. I didn't want to believe her then, but I wish I had.

It happened this way. I had complained to my colleague, who was an assistant professor of education, that after the intellectually, emotionally and physically grueling experience of completing graduate school while teaching full-time, I would really look forward to "just" being a professor. She replied, "I hate to tell you this, but you'll still be working 60 and 70 hour weeks to earn tenure and promotion because you'll have all kinds of other responsibilities besides teaching that you don't have now."

Over 12 years, three moves, and two blood pressure medicines later, I see how right she was that day. The good news is that I am now a tenured full professor at my teaching university, and I've become a lot more efficient at time management and at successfully juggling many areas of responsibility.

Here are my 10 tips for earning tenure and promotion without becoming the nutty professor.

Tip 1: You're good enough, smart enough, and darn it, people like you!

Rely on your strengths and challenge your weaknesses. My previous career as a professional writer included freelance journalism, public information, and technical writing in the software industry. Some of the strengths that I brought to the job were: being well-organized, dedicated, and genuinely delighted to be in the job. Some of the weaknesses that I brought to the job were: an inability to say "no," perfectionism, and internalized "I'm not worthy" statements. Over the years, I saw how the strengths served me and began to consciously challenge my weaknesses. But, as much of the latest [literature in leadership](#) [1] shows, your strengths are far more valuable in the workplace.

Tip 2: Repeat after me: "Ti-I-I-ime IS on my side. Yes, it is!"

Whether you're at a teaching university or a research university, being a tenure-track college professor is a demanding job with multiple areas in which you're expected to excel. Faculty at teaching universities have a heavier teaching load and often no support with many aspects of their work. Faculty at research universities may have a support infrastructure, but they bear the burden of earning "appropriate" notoriety in their fields (and often wondering what's really "good enough"). Whichever environment you're in, you must learn to be efficient with time management if you are to succeed.

To avoid feeling that you're never doing enough, track your time. For example, my daily time log for one nine-month period showed an average of 55 hours per week.

To maximize your time, organize it around different tasks. For example, I teach Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights, schedule office hours in the afternoons before I teach, and keep Mondays and Fridays open for meetings, writing at home or travel to conferences

Limit time hogs like search committees (although the benefit lies in forging relationships with folks across the university).

Tip 3: Just say NO.

This is much harder for some than others. It was very difficult for me for a variety of reasons. Fortunately, a tenured professor in another colleague shared her most treasured ways of saying "No" with me. Here are a few of my favorites:

"I need to check my schedule, I'm not sure I can fit this in."

"I can't help with the whole project, but I can do this one thing."

"It's not something I feel comfortable taking on right now, but thanks for thinking of me."

Tip 4: "It's a bird, it's a plane, it's SUPER-professor!"

Keep in mind that you cannot achieve 100 percent in all areas of responsibility all of the time. It's especially important to focus on your strengths in the beginning because this will give you momentum for the long haul. For example, my greatest strength is my teaching. So, I focused on really excelling there and my reputation rapidly spread. This gave me a little more clout to deal with some of my more "toxic" zones, such as institutional politics. Another strategy that I used was to focus slightly more on different areas of responsibility in different years, balancing out the effort spent in all areas over time.

Tip 5: "You've gotta have friends, la, la, la, la!"

Spend some of your valuable time developing relationships; they will be invaluable to you in a variety of ways. Keep in mind that advice and support can come from all fronts, not only your own department. For example, most of my mentoring came from a colleague in the College of Management that I met while we were both away at a conference when we decided to have lunch together. It also helps to know staff throughout the university. Knowing a name can help you solve many problems faster, especially advising and administrative issues.

Tip 6: Understand your department's expectations regarding research and publishing.

This is typically very hard to do; but don't let that stop you. Keep asking! At my teaching-focused university (where I also belong to a faculty union), this area is interpreted broadly as "scholarly or creative achievement or research." However, this broad interpretation was also a bit scary since there were no clear guidelines for what would be enough in terms of either quality or quantity.

Tip 7: Be strategic about presentations and publishing.

To make most effective use of my time and to always keep something in the pipeline, I used the following process for presentations and publishing:

- Only attend conferences where you're presenting something.

- Only present when you already have a publishing outlet in mind.
- Start revising your presentation for publication as soon as you return and begin submitting it.
- Expect to revise, edit, and reread again and again for some publication outlets. Getting in print can take anywhere from a few months to years.

Tip 8: Learn to be peanut butter, not peanut brittle.

Cultivate the resources to be resilient, not brittle. I just read Henry Emmons's *The Chemistry of Joy*, and among his many interesting ideas are those about physical and emotional resiliency. He describes how our different bodies (influenced by different early environments) respond differently to stress. While some of us are all used up by a stressful situation, others have far more physical resources to draw on. Wherever you fall on the resiliency continuum, if you're a university professor, you deal with lots of stress on a daily basis.

Develop regular strategies for taking care of your emotional, physical and spiritual well-being. Get enough rest, and carry healthy food and water around. Meditate, pray, exercise, whatever helps you.

Tip 9: Know your clichés.

As Crash says in "Bull Durham," "You've got to learn your clichés; you've got to know them."

Listen to your elders: Your department chair and dean matter most.

Listen to the "still, small voice called conscience": You don't have to be someone else to earn promotion and tenure.

Say what you mean and do what you say: You'll build a reputation that will last with your colleagues.

Actions speak louder than words: See above.

Tip 10: Don't worry, be happy!

If there isn't some part of this crazy, demanding job that feeds your soul, please, please, please, find something else to do with your life! For me it's teaching. No matter how discouraged I may become by other aspects of the job, it's never my students. I have yet to be bored with watching the light turn on in another soul and to know that I have helped fuel that electric current.

Author Bio:

Mary Kirk is a professor in the College of Individualized Studies at Metropolitan State University, in Minnesota.

Source URL: <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/05/06/essay-how-earn-tenure>

Links

[1] <http://www.strengthsfinder.com/113647/Homepage.aspx>