Preparing a Tenure Dossier

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Quick Survey

1. Do you understand the tenure process at your university?

2. Do you have a mentor that you trust and is useful?

3. Do you know which area of CS you will have impact?

4. How many PhD students do you expect to be mentoring while going through the tenure process?

5. Do you have a plan for what will go in your dossier with respect to research, teaching, and service?

Some Perspective

- Tenure is not a destination or a goal
- Its purpose is not job security, but the freedom that results from it
  - In all lines of academic investigation it is of the utmost importance that the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the indications of truth wherever they may lead. Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere we believe the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found. [Wikipedia/UW BOT, 1894]
- Orchestrating your life only for the sake of tenure defeats its purpose
  - Most of your career will be post-tenure, but defined by pre-tenure habits
- Preparing a tenure dossier = Preparing good habits for rest of your career

Typical Process (your mileage will vary)

- Annual Reviews + mid-term (usually 3rd year) review
- End of 5th or 6th year, prepare dossier:
  - CV, Research, Teaching, Service, (Broadening Participation) statements
- Letters solicited:
  - Usually a mix of people you suggest and senior faculty select
  - Typically leaders in the field
- Senior faculty vote based on inputs; Chair writes analysis and presents to Dean. ← This is usually the point that matters most.
- Dean makes the call; perhaps convenes an *ad hoc* committee.
  - If the department isn't willing to make hard calls, the Dean will.
- Moves up to Provost/President/Board ← usually *pro forma*.

Key Points

- Most schools care most about what other successful people think of you
  - Reference letters
  - Most people will write letters only if they already know you/your work
- Research impact
  - Not just from your papers, but conversations, talks, students, software releases, benchmarks, replication studies, …
  - Personal impressions
- Service on PCs, leadership, service to your university, …
- Teaching matters!
- Increasingly, engagement (e.g., entrepreneurship or public service) plays a role.

Questions from you: The Dossier

- Are there important parts other than funding, publications, and letters?

- What are the most important items on the tenure dossier?

- What are the biggest mistakes when preparing this? Too many different topics, not enough depth in each topic? What counts as a significant contribution? How important are citation counts (what if I don't have enough?)?

- How much should be "early years" vs. "later years"?

Some points

- Quality over quantity:
  - See https://cra.org/resources/best-practice-memos/…
  - "Contributions in a small number of high quality publications or artifacts are what should be emphasized; success as a researcher is then not primarily a matter of numbers."
- Think hard about research goals; have a coherent plan.
  - Many get tenure based on one project that had huge impact.
    - Illustrated by citations, best paper awards, software downloads, "buzz", etc.
  - Rarely by lots of mediocre papers.
  - Resist the minimal publishable unit urge.
- Funding:
  - Expectations generally that you pay for your research.
  - But also, successful competition for funds is a signal of quality from peers.
- Ideally, people are evaluating the *derivative.*
  - Tenure evaluated in year 6 of a 40 year career!

Questions from you: Letter Writers

- Tell me more about how to recruit letter writers?
- What are the things that can be done years/months before the tenure dossier is due?

Letter Writers

- Picture who are the leading people in your field.
  - That's who you want writing your letters.
- How do you get them to know you?
  - Great work.
  - Great papers, great software, great benchmarks/data sets, etc.
  - Great students.
  - Great service (e.g., on a program committee).
  - But also talks, blogs, tweets, … (visibility)

More Questions:

- What is a successful timing and balance between focusing more on proposals vs. papers while proceeding in my tenure track?

Some Responses

- Funding is important but usually requires multiple attempts.
  - A good proposal is never wasted.
  - Often discover what you really want/need to do when writing one.
  - Often rejected for silly reasons; read the feedback, adjust, and re-try
  - Occasionally, you just have to move on.
- Have a (coherent) research portfolio
  - Many people get tenure based on one really great project with big impact.
  - Ideally, the world appreciates what you want to do.
  - Often it does not. ☺
  - You can pay for the more radical projects by having some conventional ones.
  - But a list of disconnected projects is not compelling; you need an arc to the work.

Some Things to Do Along the Way:

- Keep your CV up to date and available

  - Keep track of all of your activities – its much easier to write it all down when it happens, and later remove things you don't need

- Make sure to keep an active and updated web page, and check your external profiles (e.g., Google Scholar) for accurancy

  - Research impact is as much about communication as what you do

- Invest early in teaching – you'll reap the rewards downstream

- Find local mentors and maintain good contact with them

Students:

- Students multiply your impact (ref. morning session)
  - Choose carefully; actively recruit

- Many schools require evidence of grad student advising – one or more PhD graduates and several in the pipeline
  - Postdoc mentoring can also help contribute to evidence of advising, but is not a substitute for student mentoring

Takeaways

- Make an impact.
- Have a life.
- Enjoy!