

A New Associate Professor Adjusts to Life After Tenure

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The first thing I thought, once I got the good news that I'd received tenure, was how ill-prepared I'd been for the process. Now that I am approaching my one-year "tenure-versary," I realize how equally unprepared I was for being a tenured professor.

For many months, I was so focused on the details of achieving tenure that I didn't think enough about what the promotion would mean — specifically, how it would change my daily workload, my job expectations, my work-life balancing act.

I've been using the winter break to reflect on all of the professional changes I've experienced in recent months. So from what feels like an incredibly privileged position, I want to share what I've learned in the past year with those of you who are about to receive tenure, or recently received it.

Clarify your new job expectations. We all know that upon receiving tenure you will be asked to serve on new committees, advise (more) students, and maybe even assume a leadership role in the department or college. But the details and timing of those new professional responsibilities matter.

Right after I earned tenure, I became department chair. I didn't know what it really meant to be chair of a small department that also houses the only graduate programs on our campus — thus also making me a graduate dean and a director of admissions all at once. My new administrative duties have translated into more meetings each week, new supervisory responsibilities, more daily emails, and tons of paperwork.

I understood those new obligations only abstractly before I got tenure. I never thought about the fact that they don't replace other duties — they're in addition to all of the teaching, research, and service work you already do. Without more hours in a day, more days in a week, and substantially more energy, those tasks are stretching me thin. With hindsight, I wish I had sought specific details about the scope of my new professional role from the previous department chair. Knowing about the workload ahead of time wouldn't have lessened it, but that knowledge would have certainly allowed me to plan my academic year accordingly.

Be realistic about your external obligations. Because I've been a bit overwhelmed with day-to-day duties, I find myself reconsidering work commitments. For example, back in August, I agreed to submit a book chapter, review two other chapters, and revise a grant — all by December. I had out-of-state speaking engagements scheduled in August, September, and October, as well as a conference in November. Had I been fully aware of the increase in my daily workload, I would not have planned so many "extra" tasks during the fall semester, particularly when I was also teaching a new course.

I managed to get through the semester but have now drafted a timeline for the months ahead with more-reasonable deadlines. I organized all of my administrative due dates on a calendar, so I know when I have time to start writing my new book, resubmit a grant proposal, schedule talks, attend conferences, and write a paper that has been floating in my mind for a couple of months.

I've also accepted the fact that, as much as I love teaching, I cannot create a new course anytime soon. I cannot co-teach, design new field trips, or substantively alter existing courses. The hours I used to spend on such teaching tasks — work I consider fun — are now

allocated to administrative chores. That's not my preferred type of work, but it often comes with tenure, so I must now prioritize the tasks necessitated by my new role.

Seek training. Making time for your post-tenure job duties does not mean you magically know how to accomplish them.

Last summer I emailed the new dean and asked if there was institutional support for me to attend a chair's workshop, a conference, or both. In response, she sent me a list of options and shared that she, too, had sought training before starting her deanship.

After spending so much time in graduate school, we academics often feel as if you'd have to pay us to endure more training. But the reality is that graduate school prepares us to be researchers and scholars. It rarely prepares us to teach and certainly does not prepare us to be administrators.

I confess: Given the difficulties of adjusting to my new workload, I have yet to attend any training, but I did take advantage of multiple webinars and will participate in a workshop for new chairs in the spring. I hope to learn concrete skills on how best to manage budgets, supervise staff members, and market the graduate programs. I know that once I feel more confident in my administrative abilities, my anxiety about the job will wane.

Find a mentor. I've been fortunate in my career to receive priceless advice about publishing, teaching, consulting, networking, and other aspects of faculty life from a variety of amazing mentors. But as my job duties expand, I need mentors who have done the job I am now expected to do.

What I mean: As an untenured assistant professor, I was well served by mentors who weren't necessarily in my exact field (education) or at my particular type of institution (a liberal-arts college). That was fine then, but it won't work anymore. I don't need general advice about writing for 15 minutes a day, finding the best publication venues, or choosing texts for a course. I need a mentor who has the professional experience to know *how I feel* trying to maintain an active research agenda, be an amazing teacher, advocate for students, and serve on committees — while also being a chair, a graduate dean, and an graduate-admissions director.

I emphasize the affective component of the job because that is the aspect faculty members tend to ignore while trying to earn tenure. We push aside our feelings and work harder because we think that, once we get tenure, all will be better. I am here to tell you: There is plenty of stress after tenure — different from what you experienced before tenure, but intense in its own way.

An effective mentor will help you manage the anxiety, fear, guilt, joy, pride, and everything else you feel after you get tenure, while also helping you figure out how to handle all the new job expectations that go with tenured life.

Embrace your own mentoring role. Just as you seek out new mentors, you also will be sought after as a mentor, especially if, like me, you are a woman, a member of an underrepresented group in academe, or both.

That has been the most surprising thing about tenured life — not that I am approached to be a mentor, but just how often it happens. Every time I give a talk or lead a workshop somewhere, a graduate student or an early-career faculty member asks if I can be their mentor. As a newly tenured black woman, I know the importance of these professional relationships, so my first inclination is always to say, "Sure!" But then I stop myself and do a mini-interview to see if we are a good professional fit and assess if I am able to offer the needed support.

I now have four mentees — all of them black women, each at different institutions, and one not even in my discipline. I schedule monthly check-ins with each of them and forward articles, books, and blog posts that I think they might find useful. And I regularly remind myself that achieving tenure was not just for me: It was also so other black women could imagine themselves among the 5 percent of tenured full-time faculty members in the United States who are black women., and expand our numbers.

Make more friends off campus. I learned early in the semester that, as much as I like detail-oriented work and planning, my energy comes from personal interaction. Yet being in a leadership role has changed the nature of my personal interactions at work such that they are more formal and more often focused on work-related matters (e.g., people want advice, support, etc.).

I've been able to adjust by making new friends outside of work. I joined a group on social media and have met some amazing women with whom I can do nonwork stuff like go to brunch, go bowling, do community service, and just hang out. Having friends who are not in academe means I don't have to think about grading, reading, writing, lesson planning, or reviewing files for a couple of hours at a time. That cognitive and emotional break is restorative and reminds me that I am so much more than my CV.

Try to slow down anyway. This is perhaps the most important thing to remind yourself once you have tenure. After working so hard for so long, it feels natural to continue working at that pace even though you know it isn't healthy and doesn't guarantee professional success. Taking on administrative duties adds pressure on you to work even faster and to dedicate even more of yourself to your job.

But I urge you to resist that false imperative — and I'm going to try to take my own advice in the coming year. The emails, the paperwork, and the meetings will always be present. The real work of life is finding a way to be present despite all of the busywork.

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