



Cornell University

A Short Guide to the Tenure Process

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August 2019

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The following is offered by the Provost's Office as guidance to new faculty regarding Cornell University's tenure process. It provides a general perspective on the process and identifies some key issues that can arise in the process. It is not intended, however, to cover all aspects of the process and is not meant to substitute for the more detailed guidance that individual departments, schools and colleges provide regarding their specific processes and requirements. It is critical that junior faculty seek out this unit-specific information.

General Observations

Junior faculty members at Cornell are hired onto available, permanent lines. Because the hiring decision anticipates the long-term commitment of university resources, it is done with great care and with a reasonable expectation that the faculty member will be able to meet the tenure standard. Consequently, most junior faculty members end up earning tenure. While there is some variance among units and over time, on average roughly two-thirds of junior faculty hired in a given year will ultimately receive tenure at the end of their probationary period. The remainder consists not only of those who do not receive tenure, but also those that depart the university for a variety of other reasons.

The Tenure Standard

* Cornell University's general tenure standard is simple - it requires a showing of "excellence in carrying out the responsibilities of the position, and unusual promise of continued achievement."¹ In a real sense, the tenure process simply seeks to verify that the high expectations upon which you were hired have been successfully demonstrated.

* The phrasing of the tenure standard is instructive. Its emphasis on "excellence" makes clear that individuals whose performance has been adequate or even good may not receive promotion. When your file goes up for review, you want it to be filled with superlatives. Your work should demonstrate that your presence has strengthened the department. The requirement of "unusual promise of continued achievement" emphasizes that the standard is forward looking. While the review process of necessity focuses on past performance, it does so simply as a means for predicting future performance. Viewing tenure as a finish line requiring the mechanical completion of a set number of tasks is a mistake. Rather than asking, "what do I have to get done to get tenure?," a more instructive phrasing might be "how do I create a record that gives confidence that I will continue to do excellent work in the future?"

* Although the general standard is uniform and applies to all units, the precise criteria and requirements vary by field and department. What constitutes tenure-worthy work in the

¹ See [Faculty Handbook](#), page 23 (PDF).

Department of Applied and Engineering Physics, for example, will obviously look entirely different from a successful tenure file in the Department of Performing and Media Arts. It is critical that you understand your own department's interpretation of what is required to meet the university's tenure standard. Conversations with your department chair, your mentors and your senior colleagues are the prime means for doing so.

* All aspects of your job responsibilities are important. Extraordinary performance in one area won't compensate for an unsatisfactory record in another. Thus, for example, strong research won't justify tenure if teaching fails to meet expectations. The converse is equally true. Junior faculty members sometimes perceive an insurmountable conflict between their teaching and research obligations. However, while balancing these obligations can certainly be challenging, it is worth noting that many of Cornell's most outstanding faculty typically excel on both fronts. Indeed, they typically find that each component informs and inspires the other.

Using the Pre-tenure Period Effectively

* Your efforts during the entire pre-tenure period are important. Although the pre-tenure time period for assistant professors may initially seem lengthy, it goes by quickly. You do not have time to fully master one aspect of your job – teaching, for example – before turning your efforts to other components. In some areas, the review and publication of scholarship takes considerable time, and you will need to account for this in planning how you will produce a sufficient corpus of work by the time of your tenure review.

* Even excellent scholarship will not assure tenure if the rate of productivity falls below department expectations, and conversely, a high level of output will not make up for work that is not of top quality. Aim for a sustainable rate of strong scholarship.

* Be careful in your choice of research pursuits. Guard against the temptation to bet the farm solely on extremely ambitious and speculative projects. If these fail to produce successful outcomes by the time of tenure review, the process cannot assume that success is right around the corner. This does not mean you should restrict your efforts to pedestrian projects, as this will raise concerns about your long-range scholarly trajectory. Again, it is a question of balance, and seeking the advice of senior faculty members is a key means of successfully answering that question.

* Teaching matters. In contrast to their extensive prior exposure to research and scholarship, most junior faculty members arrive at Cornell with limited classroom experience. In addition to the guidance and mentoring provided by your department, school or college, the university's Center for Teaching Innovation (<https://teaching.cornell.edu/>) offers multiple resources to help you reach the level of proficiency and pedagogical innovation required for tenure.

* Good mentoring is the best means to assure that you are making effective progress. Avail yourself of whatever formal mentoring is offered by your department, but don't stop there. For a variety of reasons, these formal mechanisms on occasion do not provide a sufficiently robust system of feedback. You bear ultimate responsibility for assuring that you are making good progress. Actively engage other faculty members both within and outside your department to provide input and advice relating to your research, scholarship and teaching. When appropriate, circulate your draft work to others for comment and ask them to visit your classes.

* The feedback you receive at your annual reviews and your three-year reappointment review is of particular importance. You should take any expressions of concern or suggestions for improvement very seriously. Sometimes these problems are described in annual reviews in somewhat understated terms because of the fear that some junior faculty may overreact and become unduly discouraged by negative feedback. Nonetheless, failure to respond effectively to these inputs will likely have a serious negative impact on your tenure review. If any aspects of such reviews are unclear, you should pursue the issue until you have a full understanding.

* Avoid over-investing in aspects of the job simply because they are the most personally satisfying or offer the most immediate gratification or positive feedback, or conversely, from devoting insufficient time to them because they are difficult or frustrating. These potential imbalances in effort can take many forms, but one of the most common happens regarding teaching and advising. Some new faculty members enjoy quick and satisfying success on this front. The energy of the classroom and the adulation of students can be intoxicating, but your success here will not offset shortcomings in research and scholarship. Conversely, junior faculty members whose initial experiences in the classroom are not entirely successful sometimes shy away from making future efforts, with unfortunate consequences at the time of tenure. Instead, you should seek help from senior colleagues and avail yourself of significant resources noted above to help you improve your teaching.

* Avoid taking on excessive service activities and commitments. This can be a particularly serious challenge for women and underrepresented minority faculty members, who are frequently invited to join committees and other activities based on their important ability to add diversity. While a lack of commitment to institutional service and collegiality can create problems at tenure time, extraordinary contributions in this area have little ability to compensate for shortcomings in scholarship and teaching. Seek the aid of your chair and mentors in finding the right balance.

* Those doing cross-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary work face special challenges. Although such work is of great value, it poses certain risks for young scholars. Publication outlets will generally be more limited in number and less well known. Similarly, there will be fewer established scholars who can effectively evaluate your work when the tenure review gets underway. In addition, although departments may favor such work in the abstract, they will also

want to see that it is firmly rooted in your home discipline. Remember that you will have your entire post-tenure career to explore new domains. Additionally, if you are working primarily in such new territories, make extra efforts (e.g. workshops, circulation of works) throughout your pre-tenure period to apprise your colleagues with your mode of scholarship so that this domain is more familiar at the time of your tenure review.

* The above concerns about cross-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary work are particularly acute for those with formal joint appointments in two departments. The norms for successful scholarship often vary between the departments, and it can be very difficult to please them both. In addition, the teaching, advising and service expectations of multiple departments can become unmanageable. Although in theory the effort expectations in each department should be adjusted so that the combined workload equals that of a single department appointment, as a practical matter departments do not always fully account for the demands imposed by the other department. These concerns have led to suggestions that new faculty avoid formal joint appointments until after tenure is awarded. If you do pursue a joint appointment, it is crucial to seek clarity from both departments regarding their expectations, ideally through some form of collectively agreed-upon documentation.

The Tenure Process

* The standard tenure clock at Cornell is six years (except for the Johnson Graduate School of Management, which observes an eight-year clock). There are few limited exceptions to this rule, including situations where an untenured faculty member is recruited after having spent time at another university in a tenure-track position. Under the six-year clock, the tenure process typically commences with the assembly of a tenure file at the end of the fifth year or the beginning of the sixth year. Thus, as a practical matter, the tenure process is based on the record of scholarship, teaching and service during the first five years.

* Tenure clock extensions are available only in limited circumstances. These include the arrival of children to a family (for which the University has an automatic clock extension policy), some forms of government or public service leaves, medical leaves²³, and substantial and unusual impediments to progress that were not in the faculty member's control. This last category of clock extensions requires department chair, dean and provost approval. If you believe you may have experienced such an impediment, discuss this issue with your chair promptly. Clock extensions are not available in situations in which teaching, research or publication simply has not progressed as quickly as was hoped. To grant extensions in such cases would create unacceptable inequities in the tenure process.

* You will need to work carefully with your department chair or other designated person to understand what is required for inclusion in the tenure file. Subject to a few limited exceptions,

² See [University Policy 6.2.1., Leaves for Professors and Academic Staff](#)

once a file is complete and the tenure review begins, there is no opportunity to add new scholarship as the process moves forward. This closure of the file is necessary in order to insure that the various decision makers in the process are evaluating the same corpus of work. Put more simply, you can't hand in your homework late.

* There are multiple, successive decision makers in the tenure process – the department faculty, the chair, the dean and the provost. In addition, there are others who advise those decision makers – the outside reviewers who evaluate the scholarship, the ad hoc committee that advises the dean and the Faculty Advisory Committee on Tenure Appointments (FACTA) that advises the provost. Although there are multiple actors in the process, the goal of each level of review is the same – to verify that the university's tenure standard has been met. Different reviewers are not applying different standards but they may reach different assessments based on their review of the tenure file. Therefore, approval at one level of the process does not guarantee that subsequent reviewers will reach the same conclusion.

* There are formal appeals processes for negative tenure decisions at the department and dean level (see [Faculty Handbook, Appendix 5.](#)) In some cases, such appeals result in reversal of a negative determination or other remedial outcomes. However, given the extreme care that is devoted to the tenure process by all involved, the majority of appeals are not successful. You should not view this as a probable route to tenure.

Final Remarks

Two things are worth emphasizing in conclusion. First, the requirements for tenure and the nature of the process itself should never be a mystery to you. If they are, you should pursue the matter, typically through your department chair and your senior colleagues, until you get the necessary clarity. If for some reason these routes are unsatisfactory, you should contact your dean's office, the Office of the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, and/or the Office of Faculty Development and Diversity.

Second, always bear in mind that the decision to hire you was made with great care and with the full expectation that you would easily earn tenure. The large majority of cases that reach the Provost's Office are truly impressive. Difficult cases are the exception. The above advice is intended to alert you to some of the pitfalls that lead to such cases. That said, you have every reason to be optimistic about the outcome of the tenure process.

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For questions, please contact the Provost's Office for Faculty Development and Diversity (ofdd@cornell.edu) or the office of the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs (vpaa@cornell.edu).