

What Happens after Tenure and Happily Ever after?

A Look-into-the-Future Edition of How Not to Suck in Grad School

June 10, 2016
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For many graduate students, postdocs, and adjunct faculty members a tenure-track job represents the Holy Grail of academic career achievement. The lucky few who earn the coveted tenure-track position spend the next five years experiencing stress, panic, extremely long hours, and stomach-churning worry over whether they will lose the, perhaps once-in-a-lifetime, job. But then...through hard work, talent, strong mentorship, and luck your university decides to grant you tenure and a reasonably permanent contract. Well, then what?

Nearly all mentorship from graduate school through to assistant professor positions focuses on earning tenure. This is a single-minded obsession for at least the first 10 years and as many as 20 years of an academic career. Every piece of guidance, encouragement, support, and wisdom is integrated into the behaviors necessary to achieve the elusive and ultimate goal of tenure. Rarely do we discuss why we want tenure, what we will do with it, or how your life changes. Yet, most academic careers spend only 4 to 6 years as an assistant professor under extreme pressures to receive tenure and anywhere from 20 to 50 years in the fairyland of post-tenure. I would argue that at least half of all junior academics have no idea what they will do post-tenure. I would bet that most will say, "More of the same." That would be a waste of the opportunity that tenure affords. Once you have achieved tenure and your own personal happily ever after, then what happens?

As always, this blog is based on my personal experiences and may not generalize. My work is in the employ of a large research university where I direct a professional program. Academia is clearly not a homogeneous profession. There are many different roles and expectations for academics. This post reflects my experiences only and certainly will not be useful to all academics.

Existential Dread

I had no idea that after I received tenure and during my sabbatical year that I would be spending so much time thinking about who I am as an academic and what I want to accomplish for the rest of my career. Existential dread is a major component of life immediately post tenure. This dread will need to be addressed in order to have the post-tenure career begin on a well-organized and productive footing. As someone who has come to academia fairly late in life after having a career as a practicing psychologist, I did not have a professional identity as an academic. Once I achieved tenure, I realized that I was an academic whether I like it or not.

Motivation to achieve and meet milestones are not big things to me like they are for many academics. I just like the work. Others live for milestones such as tenure and awards. When such huge emphasis is placed on tenure, there is a post reinforcement pause that frequently happens after getting tenure, which looks an awful lot like lack of motivation to achieve. The purpose of re-establishing the purpose of your work and processing the potential existential dread is to minimize the post reinforcement pause, which if not addressed successfully can become a long-term lack of motivation to produce.

I strongly recommend that much of the sabbatical year be spent in contemplation. What do you want to do with the rest of your career now that you do not have to publish large numbers of minor refereed scientific articles to keep your job? What is your niche within science or within your profession? What you aspire to do or to be? Post tenure results in a state similar to the legendary midlife crisis: Is this all there is? What do I do now? I am actually considering my proposal for my next sabbatical leave to be simply this: "to walk the earth like Kwai Chang Caine" so I can figure out what my years as a senior professor will be like. Failure to resolve these questions may lead to burnout, cynicism, and status as a deadwood professor.

Senior Scholar Issues

Some of the issues related to becoming an older scholar have little to do with tenure. As your reputation grows, there are more opportunities and responsibilities. Universities from around the world are interested in having you serve as an external reviewer to doctoral theses or to be an external reviewer for tenure files. Some of these documents are over 500 pages long and require a significant amount of time, energy, and responsibility. You will be asked to serve on editorial advisory boards for journals or to be an associate editor. Professional organizations want you to be an officer. You will be invited to contribute book chapters or articles to special issues of journals. You will receive invitations to provide workshops, consultation, or colloquia to a variety of audiences. Some of these opportunities are exciting and you wish you had them when you were pre-tenure. However, every opportunity requires significant time commitment and your time is a finite resource. These things simply come with the territory. When you know who you are and what you want to accomplish, then the decisions on whether to accept or decline these opportunities are much easier than if you wander through mid career without a plan.

Role and Function

The big change that nobody talks about is the day-to-day responsibilities post tenure. There is a tendency to have far more leadership roles and responsibility for governance of your university post tenure. Most universities try to protect their pre-tenure faculty members so that they can develop the teaching skills and research productivity necessary for tenure. Once tenure is obtained the floodgates open. Pre-tenure involves sitting as a member of a variety of departmental and university committees, post tenure involves chairing those committees. One thing that becomes clear is that chairing a committee is an order of magnitude more time consuming than simply attending meetings a couple times per semester.

Many departments have a rotation of roles. Once tenure is gained, you are now in the rotation for huge and time-consuming activities. Many of these roles are not simply a function of tenure, but are assigned immediately the year after the sabbatical. In other words, "while you are on sabbatical, we decided to make you chair of time-consuming committee X as soon as you return." For example, I am now program director, member of the university's tenure and promotion committee, the department's executive steering committee, and a member of nearly every new faculty search committee. I would like to advance my research, please. Effective organization of time may be even more difficult post tenure than pre-tenure. Sorry to be the one to share that.

Being director of a professional program is especially time-consuming. My first year was spent writing a 572 page self-study document for program accreditation and then coordinating a site visit from the accrediting body. Every complaint from students or faculty, incidents of clinical problems, budget issues, mediating conflicts between students and supervisors, writing annual reports to accrediting bodies, recruiting and admissions, and making the final decision on difficult and complex issues (e.g., student dismissal) comes across my desk. Ultimately, every challenging decision is made by the program director. Luckily, I have quality support from faculty members, a strong department chair, and high quality students. All you can do is try your best to be efficient, delegate when possible, and upset everyone equally.

There is nothing wrong with these roles. I am used to this level of administration as I spent 9 years as director of psychological services in a hospital setting. But the problem is that promotion to full professor, remaining competitive for increasingly difficult to acquire grants (mostly because you are now competing against extremely well-established scholars and not other noob assistant professors), and continuing to establish an international reputation is dependent almost entirely on research productivity. The year I spent writing the 572 page self-study, I published zero (zero!) refereed publications. That is a big hole in my CV. The next year I only published two papers. So it took more than a full year to fill the pipeline and return to my pre-tenure productivity of about six refereed papers per year.

The dean and department chair completely understand that my role and function have changed. My lack of productivity did not really generate much heat on me as they seem to understand the trade-off that was being made. But to granting agencies and people outside of my university, I looked like I was becoming deadwood.

Deadwood

Deadwood is not the kindest of phrases to describe a faculty member, but it happens. The deadwood professors are those who achieved tenure and then do little above the minimum requirements of the job. Publications slow to a crawl, they teach their classes, attend required meetings, hold office hours, and then go home. Critics of academia point to deadwood professors as the reason that tenure should be abolished or reformed. Honestly, I do not see much of this. In a department of about 35 faculty members only two or three might be considered deadwood and that would be a harsh judgment. This does not include those academics with illness, personal crises, changing research directions and

source: <https://researchtopracticeconnections.wordpress.com/author/shawmcgilllab/>

programs, other relatively short-term disruptions of their professional lives, and those slowing down as they near retirement. The deadwood professor relies on a permanent open-ended contract as an excuse to live a lifestyle without doing the core work of an academic. The deadwood professor occurs when there is an environment that treats receiving tenure as the end state or final major accomplishment of academia. We do not have that culture at my university. The other reason for becoming a deadwood professor is when the individual does not find meaning in work and has no plans beyond tenure. The status of the deadwood professor is an indication of a failure to navigate post tenure academia.

Ideas and Solutions

For me there were six activities that helped navigate the challenges of the academic midlife crisis. These may not work for you, but create your own activities. Tenure is opportunity. Be mindful about how you can best use this opportunity to make for a most satisfying career and life.

One of those insipid inspirational quotes is, "what would you do if you knew that you could not fail?" This really applies to the post tenure life lived well. Without pressures to produce small and frequent articles on the minutia of your field, what would you produce? This is the opportunity to produce vast and important projects. This is the opportunity to produce exciting work that may not result in a positive outcome. This is the opportunity to make work that is innovative and truly important. Keep a list of what you want to study if you did not have to worry about publication quantity. Try to publish that one big paper each year or take on a large book project in addition to your other work. Think big and make a difference.

The five-year plan has always been something that I have (like Stalin). This guides my decision making. Where do you want to be in five years? What projects do you want to accomplish? What outcomes do you want to achieve? I have found that a review of the previous five-year plan and development of a new five-year plan bring excitement, take advantage of opportunities, and help me to make my work continuously progress.

Say no and say yes. Say no to small projects that are not consistent with your five-year plan or big opportunities. Say yes to risky ventures with large opportunities for success and a more than zero probability for failure. Tenure allows risk taking, if you do not take those risks, then what is the use?

Creating a life is hard for academics. As an undergraduate many say that I will wait to live my life until I get into graduate school. Once in graduate school, the same people say I will have fun and start my life after I complete my thesis. Then as a tenure-track professor, I am too busy to have fun or have a real life. After receiving tenure, you are out of excuses. Although, I have heard some say that now they are too old to engage in fun life activities that they should have when they were younger. That can be a sad situation. My advice is to jump in without fear. If your life was out of balance, then post tenure is a brilliant opportunity to get it back in balance. For me, I returned to judo training after 26 years away and am working on converting my neglected dad bod into something that will carry me for the next 30 more years.

Lead something. This is the opportunity to take control and establish leadership as a mid-career and well-established professional. There is no choice for me but to be something of a leader as I have the formal title of program director. However, part of my five-year plan is to organize and make coherent the profession of school psychology in Canada. Being a leader is an empowering activity for senior academics that gives purpose and creates opportunities.

Give back and be generous. Remember all of those people who helped you when you were a junior professor? The chances are good that there was more than one mentor or generally encouraging person as your career was established. This is now your opportunity to give back to the next generation. Reach out and actively take these opportunities to mentor, support, and be generous with your time and effort. Giving back is a wonderful cure for cynicism.

Congratulations on getting tenure. I remember being somewhat disappointed that there was not a secret handshake, dedicated washroom, or lounge with a wet bar. In fact, there are more duties that take time from your research agenda and desire to create. A great deal of planning and mindful approaches to task are required to set forth an agenda for the remainder of your career. Tenure and the security that goes with it are nothing more than opportunities to do something special—so do not waste this wonderful opportunity.

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