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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Concrete Strategies for Economics Tenure-Track Faculty and Their Mentors

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Abstract
Mentoring tenure-track faculty is effective and increasingly utilized but there is demand for *concrete* mentoring strategies for navigating the ambiguities of the tenure track. The key driver of ambiguity—and therefore of candidate angst—is that some important aspects of the tenure decision cannot be determined until quite late in the tenure track. Two such aspects are the strength and number of external reviews the tenure committee may receive as evaluations of research effectiveness and the determination of teaching effectiveness. This paper proposes some ambiguity management strategies for implementation by candidates and their mentors as soon as the first year.

Keywords Faculty mentoring · Mentoring · Teaching effectiveness · Tenure · Tenure-track

JEL Classification A20 · A22

Introduction

This paper proposes some concrete research and teaching strategies for tenure-track assistant professors of economics and their mentors, particularly at universities with a significant undergraduate teaching mission (in other words, with undergraduate teaching loads between 2-2 and 4-4). (The author's teaching load is 3-2.) Mentoring in general, and mentoring with respect to the tenure-track, is increasingly common and is widely recognized as impactful.[1] However, conversations with assistant professors in economics and in several other disciplines over the years suggest that there

[1] See, for example, Melicher (2000), Blau et al. (2010), Muschallik and Pull (2013), Fountain and Newcomer (2016), and Wild et al. (2017) for rich discussion of the literature regarding mentoring effectiveness and optimal mentoring structures in a wide variety of academic disciplines.

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is still great interest in *how-to*, *concrete* strategies for managing ambiguities along the tenure path.[2] Note that ambiguities remain even if tenure standards at one's program/university are perfectly clear. This is because significant aspects of the tenure packet by definition do not materialize until quite late in the process. Two significant aspects are (1) the external review letters as measures of research effectiveness and (2) measures of teaching effectiveness. Managing these two ambiguities appears in this author's experience and in the literature to be relatively overlooked by tenure-track faculty and their mentors until late in the process, resulting in tenure committees sometimes having difficulty securing external reviews and in evaluating measures of teaching effectiveness that may not be robust. To be sure, there are some terrific resources available to help tenure-track faculty manage these ambiguities. In economics, candidates are well-advised to review resources provided on the American Economic Association's Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession (CSWEP) website, https://www.aeaweb.org/about-aea/committees/cswep/programs/resources/tenure, including the Winter 2013 issue of the CSWEP Newsletter that focuses upon navigating the tenure process. The following eight concrete strategies—three for research, three for teaching, and two for synergistic research and teaching—are intended to complement the great suggestions featured there and in the greater literature in order maximize the likelihood that at the end of six years of a tenure-track (particularly at a teaching-intensive college or university), internal and external reviewers can more easily glean the strengths of the packet and vote enthusiastically. The suggestions may also be useful to non-tenure-track faculty; to faculty in other disciplines; and to associate professors planning for promotion to full professor.

Research Strategies

Ultimately, one's research record will be jointly evaluated by internal and external reviewers. We want to take steps at each point along the way such that external reviewers are easy for the department and for the college tenure committee to identify and such that external reviewers are poised and ready to agree to prepare a review. The key idea in what follows is that this happy result is the logical conclusion of several steps taken over five years; as Croson (2013) also emphasizes, an assistant professor cannot begin too early to envision who those enthusiastic reviewers might be and what motivates their enthusiasm.

First, Reach Out to Tenured Faculty and Build a Research Network

A key step to take as graduate school concludes and the tenure track starts is to introduce ourselves to tenured faculty in our research area and to gain their feedback on the earliest work we have in mind for our tenure-track years. The

[2] See also Tollefson-Hall et al. (2013) and Savage (2015).

following type of outreach email almost always elicits a swift and favorable response:

> *Dear Professor X, My name is ___ and I am an assistant professor of economics at School Z. We met briefly when you gave a seminar at my doctoral program a few years ago, and/or I believe you know my advisor, Professor Y, and/or I cite your work in my latest research. I have a paper on our mutual topic of interest that I would like to present at seminars and conferences in the academic year ahead. In a few sentences, my paper regards (the following—or paste in Abstract of 100 words or less). I'm trying to get off on the right foot in my academic career. Would you be willing to join me in building a session on this topic of our shared interest at the upcoming Eastern Economic Association (or other) conference and/or might there be an opportunity for me to present a paper at your department's research seminar in the next semester or academic year? I would be very grateful for your collaboration and advice on this matter. Sincerely, ___.*

As far as collaborating on a conference session, regional, and state-level economics conferences such as those of the Eastern/Western/Midwest/Southern Economic Associations and the New York State/Pennsylvania Economic Associations are ideal venues for submitting complete sessions. Senior faculty are impressed with the initiative involved in building a session. Years later, members of the session (speakers as well as audience members) may very well be called upon to provide an external tenure review. Assuming they were impressed with one's presentation and have seen subsequent presentations and published papers emerge, they will be in the position to provide an enthusiastic review. Reviewers are able to start by stating that they first met as a result of the candidate's outreach years ago to build a session and that beyond that they are (probably) not personally acquainted with the candidate (such as having served on the candidate's thesis committee, attended the same doctoral program, or co-authored a paper with the candidate). In addition to building a session or two at general research conferences in one's discipline (economics), plan to present from time to time at one's sub-disciplinary conferences (e.g., environmental economics) and at university research seminars. These are quite valuable networking opportunities that will directly strengthen one's research production and its impact. As suggested above, the indirect and relatively underestimated benefit is that all of these activities raise the likelihood that the tenure committee efficiently identifies a robust array of external reviewers of one's work at the conclusion of the tenure track.

The above strategy is all the more poignant if one's program has a mid-tenure review process, and if that process requires letters of support at the end of year two of the tenure-track. One mentee contacted a senior faculty member at a Big Ten university (via email like the above example) whom she'd cited in her current research about possibly meeting at an upcoming regional economics conference. She attached her paper to her email. The senior professor replied enthusiastically and swiftly, confirming that they could certainly meet at the conference—and that she should let the association/conference president know to sign him up as the discussant of her paper at the conference! My mentee reported that they had a terrific meeting and that she received detailed feedback on her research. Around one year later, when asked by my mentee's department head if he could provide a mid-tenure review letter, the senior professor replied the same day that he would be delighted to provide a letter.

Second, Seek Out and Utilize Journal Paper Refereeing Opportunities as Professional Development

The importance of serving as a conscientious reviewer for journals/publishers when called upon is described in good detail by Hamermesh (1992), along with several other compellingly useful ideas for tenure-track faculty. If one has not yet been invited to review, send your CV to a few editors of journals that you often read and where you would like your work to be published; introduce yourself and let the editor know you are available to review papers in your research areas. Reviewing papers for journals creates two additional benefits for tenure-track assistant professors beyond those noted by Prof. Hamermesh: the experience improves one's own skill with the peculiarities of writing for peer-reviewed publication, and it is an efficient way to impress senior faculty (serving as editors and associate editors) who may one day be called upon to provide external reviews of one's tenure packet. As for the first benefit, most of us have found that our graduate education did not necessarily prepare us to write for publication in our disciplines—just as many new professors find that if their graduate programs prepared them to be effective teachers of undergraduates, it was either coincidental or driven by personal interest. Taking publishable ideas and converting them into peer-reviewed published articles—particularly at the top-field-journal level and above—is more difficult than it looks.[3] As peer-reviewers, we learn valuable lessons about the publishing process. We have different conversations with editors as reviewers than we have as authors; we learn better what editors are looking for and we learn what other reviewers are looking for.[4] As noted above, editors and associate editors whom we impress with our diligence (in other words, our insightfulness and timeliness) as reviewers are excellent candidates to serve as external reviewers of our tenure applications years hence. After all, by definition, they are tenured experts in our research areas; they are aware of at least some of our research and at least some of our contributions to the greater profession (for instance, our records as peer reviewers of manuscripts, grant proposals, and/or book proposals); but they probably are not personally acquainted with us and hence could provide arms-length reviews for the college tenure committee.

[3] See Conley and Önder (2014) for an insightful and sobering review of this topic.

[4] Faculty mentors are also a key resource for developing strategies for shepherding papers from complete first drafts to submissions; through the revise-and-resubmit process; and to publication. Mentors might share referee reports received for their own manuscripts and describe (1) how they successfully revise manuscripts but particularly (2) how they process rejections and keep moving forward relatively undaunted.

Third, Try to Cultivate a Single Solo-Authored Paper, Even If Co-authoring is Quite Prevalent in One's Discipline

There is no doubt that co-authoring papers is a really productive and fun way to pursue research questions; moreover, it is more and more common in many disciplines.[5] Yet, we apply for tenure as individuals, with our own voices. Paradoxically, the more productive the co-authorships, the more difficult it may be to identify those individual voices. Moreover, there is compelling evidence that this ambiguity results in biased assessments of individual productivity.[6] Therefore, it can be quite useful for reviewers, and personally rewarding for assistant professors, to nurture just a single solo-authored paper alongside one's portfolio of co-authored work. This is an opportunity to have full editorial control of a project from beginning to end and to showcase for all the particular skill and interests one brings to much of one's work, including co-authorships. After all, the motivation for a co-authorship is for people with different special skills to combine forces and achieve things that the individuals arguably could not achieve, or could not achieve nearly as efficiently. Take this opportunity to bring your special skills into sharp relief for external and internal reviewers. A good possibility is to polish a part of one's master's or doctoral thesis for this purpose.

Teaching Strategies

As Walia and Sanders (2016) emphasize, most tenure-track positions are in programs outside the proverbial 'top 50' and typically involve a significant undergraduate teaching component for which new assistant professors may not be sufficiently prepared. As Conrad (2013) describes, to gain tenure in such an environment, one's teaching effectiveness can count as much or more as one's research impact in the tenure decision. How can a tenure-track professor maximize student and colleague positive perceptions of her teaching effectiveness, particularly given the fact that while standard student evaluations of teaching are strongly relied upon, they are widely recognized as noisy, inconsistent, and biased instruments?[7] Scholars such as Sheridan et al. (2014) suggest some terrific ideas for new faculty to consider as they embark upon their teaching careers. The following additional strategies are not discipline-specific and are based on my own teaching experience plus my reading of hundreds if not thousands of sets of student teaching evaluations while serving as department chair and on a good number of tenure/promotion/hiring committees in economics and in other disciplines.

[5] See, for example, Rath and Wohlrabe (2016) and Kuld and O'Hagan (2017).

[6] See Sarsons et al. (2020).

[7] See, e.g., Braga et al. (2014) who find a negative relationship in their study sample between their measure of teaching quality (how students perform in subsequent courses) and the students' evaluations of the professors. See Boring (2017) regarding gender biases in student evaluations of teachers.

First, Strive to be Perceived as the Most Accessible Faculty Member Your Students Have Ever Had

Don't be afraid of emphasizing this to students often; being accessible does not imply living in one's office. *Accessibility* is different from *access*. Relatively few students will call upon your access compared to *all* of your students who will (option) value the fact that you are there for them if needed. If student demand for your time creates a logjam, boundaries can be added. Students give us the benefit of the doubt when we need to place boundaries around our time, based on our having first established a reputation for accessibility. Of highest importance is to offer same day responses to student inquiries and to strive to return graded student work at the class immediately following collection of the work. This is not easy, but my exam/assignment grading schedule is set months in advance, to ensure I've budgeted sufficient time to achieve this important target. Try to have a forty-second personal chat with a different student upon arriving at the classroom each day. The students with whom you chat will bank that away as proof that we care about them as people; the students in large classes with whom we may not get to chat are nevertheless watching and will rightly deduce that we definitely care about them as well. Creating a reputation for accessibility has an outsized impact upon student satisfaction and hence upon their evaluations of our teaching.

Second, Use Old Exam Questions as Homework

This extends the value of work we already put into writing good exams. It also heads off concerns that students sometimes raise that there is disconnect between the content and style of the exams and of the homework.[8] Moreover, using your own materials for homework instead of a publisher's proprietary materials reduces costs for students and is greatly appreciated; students regularly comment to this effect on teacher evaluations. Since the homework questions are old exam questions, they've been vetted by previous students so that you know that the questions 'work'. That the homework 'works' and is directly connected to the content and style of current exams significantly reduces student dissatisfaction. As a result, we are able to maintain high expectations for students *and* receive strong evaluations. Stronger student satisfaction with our high expectations, in turn, yields more time for our research. This is an important point to emphasize. The strategies suggested herein no doubt involve an upfront investment; however, these tried and true investments soon pay off in higher student satisfaction (stronger evaluations of our teaching) and in efficiency gains for the faculty member for years to come.

[8] I appreciate—and concur with—a referee's suggestion that homework and exams can also vary in degree of difficulty, such that it may be optimal to have relatively more difficult homework that leads to the exam. Certainly a range of difficulty can also be built into one's use of old exam questions as homework.

Third, as Often as Possible, Use Coursework and Discussions as Opportunities for Students to Learn the Concepts as they Apply to the Work they are Interested in Doing Upon Graduation

To my mind, this is the purest form of active learning—much of which will occur outside the classroom. As Wagner (2017) argues, enabling personalized learning is particularly important when teaching general education courses to non-majors who may not immediately recognize the value of achieving general education learning outcomes. Just as tenure-track faculty appreciate concrete advice for gaining tenure, students likewise appreciate the chance to create for themselves concrete examples of how the 'concepts of the day' can appear in their future work—and as soon as in a job interview. Faculty can lead by proposing examples in the context of their own research, teaching, and service activities at the university. Students will be more excited about learning, and they will retain more of what they learn. This is what alumni tell us. We can arguably offer this opportunity to students to personalize their educations in any course in any subject.

Consider, for example, the following question structure for a Principles of Microeconomics assignment:

> *Suppose that five years from now you and your immediate supervisor attend a meeting at which the regional vice president jumps up and says "I think our product is a very good complement to a product sold by Company Z in Missouri; I want someone to check into that and report the cross-price elasticity to me." Everyone at the meeting nods his or her head enthusiastically, but then looks away when the vice president tries to make eye contact and confirm a volunteer. Please save your colleagues by stepping forward (in short essay form); introducing yourself; explaining what the cross-price elasticity means; and by illustrating how it is computed and how the results are interpreted with some fictional numbers that make sense in the context of the career or market you intend to enter upon graduation.*

This type of question calls forth enthusiasm from students; they say they are more motivated to invest themselves in learning material they feel is realistic, and when it is clear from the assignment design that the teacher is equally concerned that the course learning outcomes are achieved pari passu with career development outcomes. For a second example, upper-division students may select the Form 10-K annual report of a US publicly-traded firm of their personal interest and prepare a paper that investigates the microeconomic concepts learned in class. This works well in the author's Industrial Organization course but could be utilized in any microeconomics course. If the paper is restricted to 5–7 double-spaced pages, students also find that it serves nicely as a writing sample that employers increasingly request during the interview process. Students read Item 1 of the 10-K regarding the firm/industry history and basic statistics and Item 7 that regards management's discussion of near-term results. Their microeconomics training leads them to readily spot concepts such as first-mover advantage, price discrimination, tie-in sales/bundling, and alternative strategies for growing and protecting intellectual property rights. Their papers explain these concepts in the context of their career/market of interest to an audience assumed to be representatives of the firm at a job interview and critically assess the extent to which the firm appears to be managing the concepts well. Alumni and firms report that the real-world grounding of this assignment facilitates a lot of learning. Written student evaluations of my teaching routinely include many positive comments about how the assignment structure enabled them to well express what they have learned about IO/microeconomics but also bridged from the classroom to the career/market where they will soon find themselves. At the end of the day, as instructors, we need to assess whether students are achieving the course learning outcomes, and upper-division economics courses commonly require term papers/projects. This 10-K-based assignment achieves our basic assessment goal, but does so in a way that results in no additional (grading) effort on the faculty's part and in a way that students find personally useful. This impression results in more favorable student evaluations of teaching than would otherwise be the case.

These three teaching-focused strategies are intended to complement senior faculty and department head guidance to junior faculty regarding teaching, and guidance to tenure and promotion committees as to teaching norms and teaching evaluation norms in the discipline. Mentoring is particularly impactful in terms of teaching technical courses in which students disproportionally struggle and therefore may disproportionally give lower, if not unfair, evaluations of teaching. The senior faculty mentor can greatly facilitate these flows of information; help junior faculty interpret their course evaluations; and identify additional strategies customized to the faculty member's specific courses and available resources.

Synthesizing Research and Teaching Strategies

Heading toward a conclusion, it is useful to ponder ways of synthesizing our research and teaching strategies—to look for opportunities to raise our perceived research and teaching effectiveness simultaneously.

First, Consider Publishing a Single Paper in a Disciplinary Education Journal Based on Your Most Effective Teaching Strategies

In economics, we have the *Journal of Economic Education* and the *International Review of Economics Education* and other venues; examples in other disciplines are featured among this paper's references. This is a chance to publish a paper and carry out our teaching missions at the same time. While student evaluations of teaching may be noisy, inconsistent, and/or biased, spending discretionary time publishing a single article that highlights one's pedagogy is clear evidence to tenure committees that we care about our teaching and the welfare of our students. By corollary, it is useful to attend a teaching or education-related workshop or conference from time to time. These are opportunities to learn strategies for achieving our teaching objectives more efficiently. Success in doing so enables more time for research and/or for our more general life ambitions.

Second, Promote Undergraduate Research Opportunities

Engaging undergraduates in research projects is a relatively high-cost, high-impact teaching strategy. Students learn a lot, and nurturing students in this direction unambiguously conveys the depth of one's commitment to undergraduate student welfare to colleagues, deans, and tenure committees. Of course, there are many ways to convey one's depth of commitment; however, taking undergraduate students under one's wing on research projects (either as research assistants or as co-authors) sends a powerful signal of one's deep commitment. Everyone understands that this is really difficult to do, especially at scale, and particularly if one's program is also serving graduate students. One only needs to have a single undergraduate student under the wing at any given moment to send a strong signal. Fenn et al. (2010) and Wagner (2015) describe strategies for nurturing peer-reviewed published undergraduate research. The research could emerge from strong student term papers or could be a paper the faculty member starts. Having an undergraduate student join such a project and champion its completion can be very effective. To the extent that peer-reviewed publications obtain, this robust teaching strategy simultaneously becomes a robust research strategy. At a minimum, however, an increasing number of universities look very favorably upon *tangible faculty effort* to promote undergraduate research, and it is advantageous to be ahead of the curve on this movement at the beginning of one's career. Students and their families understand that a custom, personalized education is costly for universities to provide and has a high likelihood of paying off in the long-run. But that value-proposition depends strongly upon 'custom, personalized' being obvious and exciting. Coming up for tenure with just a single peer-reviewed publication co-authored with an undergraduate student is a position of strength at universities with relatively high undergraduate teaching commitment and relatively high tuition. Journals in which undergraduate co-authored papers have appeared include *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*, *Environmental and Resource Economics*, *Ecological Economics*, *Atlantic Economic Journal*, *Constitutional Political Economy*, *Southern Economic Journal*, and *Journal of Sports Economics*.

Conclusion

Proposing strategies for tenure-track faculty and their mentors runs the risk of overgeneralizing. Hence, all of the suggestions herein must be considered in the context of each faculty member's university, department, and discipline expectations. Mentors play a key role in helping junior faculty discern those expectations. None of the above strategies are necessary conditions for tenure. Arguably, none of them are sufficient conditions either. However, if my own family member or best friend were anxious about the tenure track, this is the highlight film of ideas I've seen work for many people across several disciplines and over many years. The advice offered herein is also intended to be useful to non-tenure-track faculty; assistant professors in a wide variety of other disciplines—with the caveat that research norms vary to some extent with the disciplines; and to associate professors planning for promotion to full professor.

There are other ideas one could consider. For instance, researching what one's current tenured faculty colleagues presented in their own tenure or promotion (to full professor) packets, weighted according to how recently they earned tenure/promotion, is a concrete reflection of what a promising tenure/promotion packet looks like. Service is not explicitly addressed in the above strategies, but is another important feature of our profession, no matter the discipline. It proves handy to review the various college and university committees where one might serve and select something of particular interest before others have ideas for your time; doing so makes it much easier to deflect requests that we agree to 'just one more thing'. Indeed, it is important to keep one's CV updated on one's website so that others can see the extent of one's service; maintaining a public record of one's service gives important context to one's need to say 'no' sometimes. Department chairs and faculty mentors can also prove instrumental in protecting the time of assistant professors. Saying 'no' is really difficult—so assistant professors need a strategy and need support. When the author was on the tenure track, his time could not be requested by anyone, including the dean, without going through the department chair—who routinely said 'no' to such requests and emphasized to others that it was the chair saying 'no' rather than the assistant professor saying 'no'. Beyond that, my rule of thumb is to try to appear as often as possible wherever my dean appears. The logic is as follows. The dean is a busy person and cannot be everywhere. The dean should therefore choose to be at the highest-impact events on campus. Those are typically ones where other members of the campus leadership are present (including college-level faculty meetings), and/or where students are being recognized for excellence, and where their parents are likewise present. Those 'other members of the campus leadership' largely self-select into the shared governance of their institutions—with or without an official leadership title—and they disproportionately serve on tenure and promotion committees. Strongly consider self-selecting into that group. Developing a presence on campus and in the department is the real objective, rather than serving on committees per se.

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