

# Advice to New Faculty Members to Increase Your Chances of Getting Tenure/Permanence

The following pieces of advice are based on consultations with your fellow faculty members. This is not a complete list of things to keep in mind when beginning a tenure/teaching-track appointment at McMaster nor does it have any official standing. We hope that you find it useful. Suggestions for additions and corrections are always welcome.

Many people focus on the endpoint of the tenure/permanence process — what happens when your case 'goes up,' forgetting that this is a process that starts from the first day of your appointment.

## GETTING READY

The University values transparency in the tenure/permanence process and has policies in place to ensure that cases are considered on the basis of merit alone. Become informed about the tenure/permanence process *as soon as you begin* your tenure/teaching-track position to increase your chances of getting tenure/permanence down the road.

Prepare yourself by reading and understanding the University's policy and procedures. You can find this same information in two places – on the **University Secretariat Policy, Procedures & Guidelines website for Appointment, Tenure and Promotion** and also on the **MUFA website**. This advice sheet will take you to the information on the MUFA website.

You should have a copy of the **MUFA Faculty Handbook** which you can access online or you can order, free of charge, a hard copy of it from the Bookstore.

Know your rights and obligations. They are laid out in the **Policy and Regulations in Respect to Academic Appointment, Tenure and Promotion** (rev. 2007) (often referred to as the 'yellow document,' since it was once printed on yellow paper) as well as the various **Supplementary Policy Statements [SPS]**.

Know where you can find help along the way. There's the **MUFA Executive Committee Representative for Tenure and Permanence**, whose job is to give advice and help ensure that proper procedure has been followed in tenure/permanence cases. The key person in an official position is the Chair of your Department, who should be guiding you through the process. The Dean of your Faculty can also help. Your colleagues can also be very helpful especially if they have been members of T & P committees at the Department, Faculty and Senate levels.

Be sure that the formatting of your vita is consistent with regulations outlined in **SPS 15a Curriculum Vitae Guidelines** as well as any departmental guidelines that may exist. When in doubt, ask informed others about where to place information on your vita.

All faculty should seek ongoing feedback about their progress. Every year in your tenure/permanence-track, ask your chair for a written assessment of your performance in research, teaching and service. This is required under the **Policy and Regulations in Respect to Academic Appointment, Tenure and Promotion** (rev. 2007). Next ask for a follow up meeting to discuss this written assessment. After the follow-up meeting, provide your chair with a written statement of both your understanding of the feedback and your plans to act on the feedback. T & P committees will not be bound by these written documents but they can clarify your objectives and indicate how well the T & P process was followed.

All departments should have a mentorship program for tenure/teaching-track faculty members. Consult your mentor on a regular basis. If you don't have one, seek to get one either formally or informally. It helps to have the advice of someone who 'knows the ropes.'

Check your letter of appointment to make sure that you understand how much time you have on your 'tenure/permanence clock.' If for some reason your appointment begins at some date **other than** July 1, your tenure/permanence clock at McMaster starts on the first July 1 following the beginning of your appointment at McMaster.

Do not sign any documents without having read them thoroughly and understanding fully their implications regarding your tenure/permanence clock. If in doubt, consult.

If your letter of appointment gives you credit for previous service elsewhere, then you should stay in close communication with your Chair and Dean as to what this means for the total number of years that you have until a final decision must be made on your case for tenure. This matter is currently being considered as part of revisions to the Tenure and Promotion Policy.

If you have an illness or career interruption during your probationary period that significantly and adversely affects your ability to do research and publish and/or to teach, make sure that you get documentation of the duration and severity of this illness and that this documentation is taken into account in the consideration of your case.

If your situation entitles you to take sick leave, and doing so would extend your clock, think seriously about taking this opportunity for a leave. 'Soldiering on' without taking a leave, when illness is taking time from your research activity, can cost you when it comes time to be considered for tenure/permanence. See **SPS 18 Guidelines regarding Leaves and Career Progress.**

Only birth mothers are able to take pregnancy leave, whereas **all** parents, including adoptive parents, can get parental leave. Take advantage of the pregnancy/parental leave opportunity outlined in **SPS 19 Pregnancy/Parental Leave Policy for Faculty and Librarians.** It complies with federal and provincial law and recognizes the role of **both** parents in childbirth, adoption and child rearing.

If some unusual action is taken with respect to your probationary period, such as extending the time limits or a consideration of your case ('stopping the clock'), make sure that all the procedures in the University's policy are followed exactly. Related to this, do not sign any documents without having read them thoroughly and understanding fully their implications regarding your tenure/permanence clock. If in doubt, consult.

## **PUBLICATIONS AND RESEARCH**

Make sure you have a good understanding of both department and broader disciplinary expectations for research and grant-getting productivity. Ask for a specific, written indication of your department's expectations, especially regarding numbers of publications and quality of outlets. Request the publication lists of recently tenured colleagues. Some may tell you that it is hard to set specific standards but it is even harder to meet vaguely defined objectives.

Clarify what counts as a publication – letter of acceptance or in print? Ask for clarification on the weights accorded papers, books, chapters in books, conference presentations, etc. What is the importance of the number and order of co-authors?

External referees are disciplinary scholars and researchers from **outside** the McMaster University community. Their assessment counts greatly. Take a look at **SPS 13 Guidelines for External Referees** to see the questions that are asked of the referees when considering your case. Also make sure to use the two-page research statement that is provided to external referees according to **SPS 12 #4 Procedures for Selection of and Communication with External Referees.** Use them to reveal your intellectual growth since your dissertation research. Highlight the significant features of your past research, and outline your future research plans. This is your opportunity to shine — take advantage of it!

You will have the opportunity to view the list of potential external referees for your tenure case according to **SPS 12 #2 Procedures for Selection of and Communication with External Referees**. Register your objections and state your reasons in writing if you do not agree with a name listed.

Know that *the timing of tenure is deceptive*. This has repercussions for your publications and research. The tenure clock is six years and you must first be considered for tenure in year five, but how long do you have to produce the publications you need to get tenure? If your case goes up in year five, then you have less than four years from the start of your six-year clock. Your publications will go out to external tenure referees at the end of your fourth year for your tenure case to be decided at the beginning of year five. Be wary of multi-year projects with uncertain payback periods and of data the ownership of which may be disputed.

Keep an eye on the *timing* of your submission of articles to peer-reviewed journals and publishers. The time lag between the submission of an article and its final publication (if it is successful) can be substantial. Pay attention to differences in turnaround time at different outlets. Learn about the journals to which you are sending your research — their wait times, impact factors, and rejection rates — so you can make informed decisions about where and when your research ought to be submitted. Your external referees will be examining works that are 'in press' and 'submitted for review,' but it's always best to have works that are actually published in final form for them to examine when considering your file.

## THE PROCESS

If you are invited to speak to your departmental or Faculty T & P Committee when it is considering a recommendation for your reappointment or tenure/permanence, do not treat this invitation as a mere formality. The reason could be that the Committee intends to recommend that your appointment be allowed to lapse. Be prepared to explain to the Committee why they should not make such a recommendation.

You are allowed to take an advisor with you if you are invited to meet with the Faculty Committee. This advisor need not be at arm's length. It will help to have someone who is familiar with your teaching and research record and who can provide you with intellectual and emotional support.

McMaster is a community of supportive scholars but if you think that your departmental T & P Committee and/or your departmental chair is biased against you, do not ask higher administrative officials to change the procedure to compensate for this bias. There are safeguards in the procedure against bias, and it is better to rely on those safeguards than to expect the senior administration to invent a new procedure off the top of their heads that will be fair to all concerned. As an example of a safeguard, your Chair must be accompanied to the Faculty T & P Committee by a representative from your Departmental T & P committee who is elected by your department (not handpicked by the Chair).

## TEACHING

Teaching is paramount for permanence but is also very important for tenure. Candidates with good publication records have been denied tenure due to poor teaching.

Be sure to understand and carefully follow the **SPS 10 Policy on the Encouragement of Teaching Excellence** (rev. 2009) and **SPS 15B The Preparation of Dossiers for Tenure and/or Promotion** (rev. 2009). Make sure to include your statement (about one page) identifying and describing your teaching philosophy. In this, you should also outline how your teaching practices conscientiously implement your philosophy and provide evidence that your teaching practice is effective. Highlight the significant contributions to the curriculum and pedagogy that you have made. This one-page statement is another opportunity to shine — take advantage of it!

Make sure that the newly revised **SPS 10** (rev. 2009) guidelines are followed. Speak to your departmental

chair about how the current rules demand attention to peer evaluation. Peers are to evaluate your teaching a number of times and in varied settings. They should occur with more than one evaluator and more than one site or occasion of evaluation. Be sure that your annual written review comments on your teaching effectiveness. Discuss this review with your Chair and respond in writing with any plans to remedy perceived shortcomings.

Pay close attention to the student evaluations of your teaching. They count. Familiarize yourself with the questionnaire used, and the sorts of information about your teaching that it does and does not provide. Find out where your teaching ratings sit in relation to those of your colleagues especially those who have taught the same or similar courses. In this regard, **SPS 10** (rev. 2009) stipulates that departments will provide all instructors with contextual data (averages and medians, ideally a histogram) for all the courses given in each term. This report will be used by the department as input for promotion, tenure, permanence, and/or salary reviews. Make sure that you receive this information.

If your teaching ratings are low relative to the departmental benchmarks implied by contextual data (see previous paragraph), it will help your case for tenure/permanence if you can document that you took advantage of opportunities to improve your teaching provided by the **Centre for Leadership and Learning**, particularly its **Resources Section**. If you take advantage of these resources and opportunities and they help improve your teaching ratings, make sure that this fact is recorded in your teaching dossier. Seeking help to improve your teaching generally increases ratings.

## **SERVICE**

Do your share of service work, but be very wary of unnecessary administrative burdens. Strive for excellence in teaching and research from the start.

## **SOME FINAL THOUGHTS**

Going up for tenure/permanence can be a stressful experience, but you can influence this. An active, strategic, and thoughtful approach on your part is the best means of reducing such stress. .

Be patient with the process. Talk to people who 'know the ropes' and learn from them. Nourish your body, mind, and spirit. In particular, get adequate sleep, good food, exercise, fun, rest, and relaxation. These things really help.

## **WEB LINKS**

University Secretariat Policy, Procedures & Guidelines website for Appointment, Tenure and Promotion (<http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/faculty/Appointments/index.html> )

MUFA website (<http://www.mcmaster.ca/mufa/>)

Faculty Handbook (<http://www.mcmaster.ca/mufa/handbook/Handbook.html>)

Policy and Regulations in Respect to Academic Appointment, Tenure and Promotion (rev. 2007) ([http://www.mcmaster.ca/mufa/handbook/T&P\\_Policy\\_2007.pdf](http://www.mcmaster.ca/mufa/handbook/T&P_Policy_2007.pdf)) [\*'yellow document']

Supplementary Policy Statements [SPS] (<http://www.mcmaster.ca/mufa/handbook/AppendixC-sps.html>)

MUFA Executive Tenure Committee Representative ([http://www.mcmaster.ca/mufa/MUFA\\_Executive2011.pdf](http://www.mcmaster.ca/mufa/MUFA_Executive2011.pdf)).

September 26, 2011