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**P&T CONFIDENTIAL****Presenting Your Tenure File**

**The best thing you can do for your tenure packet is make it as impressive in design as in content**

By DAVID D. PERLMUTTER

The packet you assemble to support your case for promotion and tenure is more about substance than style. But style matters, and how much it matters can depend on the substance.

Say you're applying for promotion and tenure in history, and the key component of your packet is a published book by a major university press that has won a significant national award and laudatory reviews in top journals. Odds are, you will get a favorable recommendation from an outside reviewer even if the copy of the book you sent is dog-eared and has coffee stains on it.

But if you have not published the requisite number of articles in the right journals, the aesthetics of the packaging won't help you, no matter how impeccably your file is designed and organized. In one case I heard about at a community college, the full-color, laser-printed pie charts that dazzlingly displayed the candidate's peer and student evaluations could not obscure the fact that the ratings were universally low.

Nevertheless, the presentation of the tenure file — the arrangement of materials, the choices about which items to include and the best way to include them — is a significant factor in outside evaluations. And the same material, and how it is presented, will be of issue to your "internal outsiders," the administrators and members of the campuswide P&T committee who will assess your file after it leaves your department.

People who give up their time to review your case will strive to be fair and candid in most cases, but they can't help but be influenced by a file that is poorly laid out, with relevant documents missing, and no context provided for teaching-evaluation scores or journal-acceptance rates. Some basic principles hold for the construction and arrangement of any promotion and tenure file:

**If possible, check your file before it's sent out to reviewers.** One of the great conundrums of tenure-packet presentation is that often you are at the mercy of others. I have heard horror stories of assistant professors going up for tenure and learning later that their neatly styled and organized portfolio was "helpfully" rearranged by well-meaning but incompetent staff members or senior professors, or worse, by villains who wanted to make the candidate look bad. Institutional rules and traditions vary on this but you want to be as involved as possible in assembling your tenure file.

**The audience's perspective is vital.** A tenure packet is not great art; it's functional, and any aesthetic value it possesses lies in how clear and clean it is. No full professor I know has ever described leaping with joy upon receipt of a big UPS box containing a tenure packet. We view it as a necessary duty, part of the job. Some senior academics who actively resent the labor (and potential liability) of serving as an outside reviewer, especially since most of us don't get paid to do it. The target audience for your tenure packet, thus, is not necessarily not an eager one, so anything you can do to make the task simpler and less confusing will be welcomed, and will count in your favor.

**Get an early start.** Begin organizing your tenure file in your first year on the job. We all need a periodic CV check. Circulate your vita to respected mentors in your home department and in your field, and ask for suggestions. Establish a fixed layout for your CV, and train yourself to update it regularly. Some people put a reminder on their calendar to "update CV" on the first day of every month. The school in which I now teach has a *Monday Memo* with faculty news, and I force myself to take whatever information I have submitted to that newsletter and put it on my CV.

Create a way to keep track of your achievements but with this caveat: Your institution will have its own format for tenure materials. You will need to make sure your organizational system is in compliance with its boilerplate.

**Follow your format.** I am always astonished when I receive tenure files that look like the candidates just dropped into a box everything they had in their file cabinet rather than organizing it into the pre-existing scheme they used on their CV's. The most attractive tenure packs I have seen further organize documents into separately bound sections — book chapters versus journal articles, for example. Each grouping of information should have a labeled tab to make it easy to spot, and also a differently colored title page. Trust me, the extra work will result in a package that frames your accomplishments nicely.

**Include the correct materials.** In one promotion file I reviewed, I was surprised to see a book manuscript in the tenure packet. The CV and cover letter gave no indication that the pages were either under submission or under contract. In short, the manuscript did not count for promotion and tenure, so why was it included? I have also seen candidates include articles that were published before their tenure clock began and thus were not relevant to the evaluation under their own institutions' rules. Worse is when important documents are missing altogether; the message sent is "I don't care."

**Give some context.** The "who did what" of the tenure pack is a crucial element to help us judge you, especially when the institution's promotion and tenure guidelines include some specific standards, like numbers of articles published in major journals. How am I supposed to evaluate an article in which you are the third and final author if you don't explain your contribution to the effort?

So provide the background information. Even in terms of university service, it helps to know what, specifically, your five years on the graduate-awards committee entailed. Sure, it's possible to overwhelm an outside evaluator with details, so keep your contextual annotations as brief as possible. In general, however, it is better to overexplain than to underexplain. Confusion is never helpful to your cause.

**Define the standards.** One element of a tenure packet that is particularly influential on outsider reviewers is the cover letter. It guides the reviewer on the criteria by which your case is to be judged. Unfortunately, that is the one element of the packet that is most likely to be out of your hands.

You do have the right to ask your department, tactfully, how the criteria will be described to outside

reviewers. A good cover letter delineates the standards and focus of the review. For example, a letter might instruct, "Please let us know if this candidate would get promotion and tenure at your institution," or "Please assess our candidate by the attached university promotion and tenure criteria," or "We do not ask you to determine whether the candidate deserves tenure but rather to assess his scholarship; other reviewers will address his teaching and service."

**Don't spin or puff up your record.** A tenure packet should be a cant-free zone. Undersell rather than oversell. Do not try to elevate a tiny press or an unknown journal into the ranks of the top dogs. The evaluators in your field will know. If there are special circumstances to a very low teaching evaluation you received in a particular course, such as its difficulty or unpopularity with students, maybe that is worth noting, but don't attempt to mislead.

A colleague said she once reviewed a P&T packet in which "everything that was listed as 'major' was objectively 'minor.'" You will not spin your way to promotion and tenure. In fact, you will further hurt your case if we sense you are trying to deceive us.

Yes, the substance of a tenure packet is more important than its presentation. But, as in many other aspects of life and labor, packaging and design are not inconsequential factors. The best thing you can do for your tenure packet is to make it as impressive in clarity and organization as in content.

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