



Careers

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A Plan for Surviving Tenure-Year Syndrome

The vote was in her favor but not unanimous. So why was everyone acting as if she had terminal cancer?

By ELIZA PETERSON

ONE-BY-ONE THEY CAME to visit my office. Senior colleagues by the dozen arrived to counsel the afflicted junior professor about whom they had just made a positive (but not unanimous) recommendation for tenure. Although none of them brought flowers, nearly all approached me as if I had just been diagnosed with a terminal illness.

How are you holding up?, they would ask. Can I help you find another job? They all tentatively offered me a chance to talk but looked more like it was they who needed a heart-to-heart.

The few who didn't show up at my door looked distinctly uncomfortable in my presence, offering only stricken glances and nervous shuffling as I walked down the hall. Suddenly, I was no longer the hopeful assistant professor but one with a case of Tenure-Year Syndrome—a dreaded social disease that ails those currently “going up.”

Forgive me if I seem to make light of the gravity of my situation. I am an assistant professor of the humanities at a major research university. I worked to make my tenure file as strong as I could within the semblance of a balanced life. I taught, I published, I advised, I presented, I served on committees, I hosted speakers, I went to dinners.

Still, given the large size and diverse intellectual orientations of the faculty in my department, I knew that, short of winning a MacArthur award, my file would be open to critique. Earning tenure is both possible and frequent at my institution, but the bar is high, the criteria hazy. That I knew from the get-go.

Weeks of professors behaving weirdly prompted me to see the absurdity of my current condition. A divided, although largely favorable, vote neither surprised nor dismayed me—it was probably the best I might have hoped for. The astonishing part was the parade

of senior faculty members offering condolences for the outcome. While one or two opened with congratulations, most arrived as if to a hospital room. Some were morose, wringing their hands, visibly distressed over the process. They offered dispirited accounts of the discussion and foretold certain doom. Following winter break, one colleague asked timidly if I had managed to have a nice holiday despite the situation. “Absolutely,” I replied. She looked at me incredulously: “Really?”

Others came angry, convinced I had gotten a raw deal. They listed a host of reasons for me to feel righteous indignation. It was tempting to

Continued on Page C4

First Person

JOBS

FACULTY POSITIONS

Humanities

C10-C11

Social & behavioral sciences

C12

Science, technology, & mathematics

C13-C14

Professional fields

C15-C17

ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS

Academic affairs

C18-C25

Student affairs

C26-C28

Business affairs

C28-C34

Deans

C34-C36

EXECUTIVE POSITIONS

Presidents

Chancellors

Provosts

C36-C39

INDEXES

Positions in display ads

Geographical

Employer Profiles

C5

HOW TO PLACE A JOB ANNOUNCEMENT

C5

On the Web

2,877 positions available

Sign up for e-mail alerts

Special searches

chroniclecareers.com

INSIDE

Facing the Truth

So you want to apply to teaching-oriented colleges but don't have any classroom experience? **C2**

The Future of Plagiarism

Back when I was a student, it, like, took a lot of effort to pilfer someone else's work. **C3**

Surviving Tenure-Year Syndrome

Continued From Page C1

locate the source of my trouble in some definite enemy. But outing the naysayers would neither have brought comfort nor explained this peculiar aftermath.

Both the angry and the morose provided unsolicited accounts of the discussion and, not surprisingly, their accounts differed. Each drew different lines of division in the department—whether in terms of field, methodology, or tenure criteria. Most seemed to throw up their hands and apologized for being unable to help beyond volunteering themselves as an audience for my questions, complaints, or rants, depending.

For the most part, I didn't want to talk—at least not to them. When a once-friendly colleague scuttled up the stairs to avoid my wave hello, it was clear that my ambiguous status made many of them nervous.

I became confused and distraught. It had been a positive vote. Why did I feel like I had cancer? Why were my colleagues acting as if they had not delivered a split decision but a dire prognosis?

As I found myself ducking into dark corners and fleeing the office whenever possible, I began to ponder how I wanted to be while afflicted with this case of Tenure-Year Syndrome. I didn't want to end up morose and depressed, nor did I want to be angry and bitter. I also knew that I was entirely done playing the eager junior professor. I needed a mind-set, a mantra to live by in the coming months of limbo (now four and counting).

Bit by bit, I began to see a way through the muddle. I sought out a couple of senior colleagues whom I trusted to give me it to me straight: Was there something genuinely bizarre or troublesome about my case?

One mentor, whose advice over the years had been both caring and forthright, told me not to forget that many more positive factors had been raised in the meeting than negative ones. Hold your head high, she said; you have nothing to be ashamed of.

Indeed, I had begun to feel as if I were walking around with a scarlet question mark on my shoulder. My anguished supporters seemed to be focusing only on the negatives and forgetting the actual tally.

My reckoning of various euphemisms suggested that perhaps two-thirds of my colleagues had voted in my favor (a percentage confirmed by later visitors). I could live with that. At the college and university levels, where decisions were not of the rubber-stamp variety, the vote could still go either way and unanimity would have guaranteed nothing.

It was my department that seemed to have a low tolerance for disagreement. In a subsequent tenure case, I overheard one of my morose colleagues sigh while

walking toward the conference room, "Let's hope we have a happier meeting."

I cringed. Was consideration of tenure cases really determined by the relative desire for departmental happiness? But it was also at that moment that a glimmer of understanding appeared. Maybe it's not about me. The frustration, the unhappiness, the uneasiness with division was less about my merits as a scholar than the social psychology of my department.

What appeared to upset my visitors most was that the department had not come to a consensus decision, as it often had in years past. Sometimes those votes

seemed all that unusual. But the tragic version seemed to be spinning out of control with me cast as the hapless victim, a role I didn't want to play.

I decided to do my own spin and take back some control over my own image (or at least self-image).

So when the next person arrived to announce how terribly sorry he was and how I had suffered unjustly, I replied, "You know what, I'm actually trying to resist that interpretation. From what I understand, people had a lot of positive things to say in the meeting, yet nearly all I have heard since is about the nega-

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represented the impression of consensus rather than its actual achievement, and clearly some members of the department had grown disgruntled with obligatory harmony. Perhaps this year signaled that my department was exchanging a conciliatory mode of governance for a more confrontational one.

My tenure case may have been a catalyst in that shift but could not have caused it. One colleague acknowledged as much: "I found the whole episode very upsetting. It's about a lot of things in the department that don't have much to do with you. I lost several nights' sleep over it, but that's not your responsibility."

You're right, it's not.

It finally occurred to me that the whole thing was being overblown. The aftermath made my case seem much more controversial than I believe was warranted. Neither my case nor my critics

I'd like people to keep both sides of the argument in mind. So there was some dissent—big deal. I never assumed the vote would result in balloons and a marching band. I am not responsible for the fact that everyone else seems unable to tolerate what is, after all, a relatively low level of departmental discord. Nor do I want to continue to endlessly dissect 'what went wrong.' Let's move on. The game isn't over yet, and we'll see what happens at the next level."

The impact on my visitors, most of whom agreed, was less obvious than it was on me. It was a liberating experience.

My new stance returned to me a sense of confidence at a moment when it was easy to succumb to feelings of powerlessness. Rather than becoming the department's poor little match girl, I smiled broadly when I walked down the halls, and it wasn't for show. I felt that I had

solved the riddle. I might not control my own destiny, but I could define myself on my own terms rather than theirs. Perhaps I could survive this malady in good mental health.

An old friend reminded me that while I was in an awkward position professionally, it wasn't especially unique. We've all heard more gruesome tales of the tenure process than mine. My department's antics did not single it out for special pathology, but they did provide me a window onto a common experience.

So many of us have endured Tenure-Year Syndrome only to emerge with scars. Many of my colleagues seemed eager to share stories of their own struggle, with a note of solidarity or regret. And every year there are more who must negotiate the tricky etiquette of tenure review. We would be wise to heed the advice given to people on how best to relate to terminal patients—focus on the person, not the cancer.

As for me, I have made my peace with the possibility of being denied tenure. It would not crush my will to live. To be sure, it would make my life more complicated. But if the worst should happen, I don't foresee months of self-recrimination or wallowing.

As my file moves ever so slowly up the line, the whole process seems more abstract and less about me each day. While that thought might drive some to distraction, I tend to find it vaguely amusing. Gallows humor, perhaps, but it has helped me to survive my condition.

I have my colleagues to thank for that. If they had not been so odd, I might have been encouraged to take the whole thing far too seriously. Tenure-Year Syndrome is, after all, only temporary.

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Forum: Do You Have a Deal Breaker?

The Careers section of The Chronicle maintains discussion forums on academic work and life. Here are some comments posted recently in our Job-Seeking Experiences forum. To join the discussions, visit <http://chronicle.com/forums>

Comment: A place I interviewed with would require me to teach five sections of the intro class per year (three and two), and this is also a requirement for every student, not just majors. In addition, I would teach two other courses per year. I'm not sure if this is a deal breaker for me or not yet. The thought of teaching 75 students, most of whom don't want to be there, is enough to make me want to cry. ...

Share your deal breakers! Will you do anything for the right price? Can beggars be choosers?

Response: I'm currently working in my "deal breaker" position. I teach four sections of a required intro course every year. I have a 4-3 (sometimes 4-4) teaching load. I often have single classes that

are about 200 students, meaning that I can frequently have over 400 students a semester. ... However, when push came to shove, I needed a tenure-track job with a salary and benefits more than I needed to hold out for anything approximating my ideal position. Now I'm hoping I can "write my way out," but more and more I'm asking myself what the deal breaker is now.

Response: Having to sign one of those statement-of-faith forms.

Response: Salary has to be a minimum number so I can pay my day care and pay off school loans. Coffee shop must be within walking distance of lab.

Response: \$500,000 for small, two-bedroom houses in the area.

Response: I wouldn't take a job that would keep me away from my kids. I'm willing to work long hours, but mornings, evenings, and weekends with my family are sacrosanct.