

Surviving the Tenure Process A Model for Collaborative Research

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Abstract

This article presents a model of collaboration to manage the research responsibilities in the librarian tenure process, a model that has been successfully used by the authors since November 2008. It includes a wiki, weekly meetings, and a timeline to plan, organize, and implement project goals. The routinization of the research process reduces anxiety, clarifies goals, and makes it possible to collaborate on multiple projects simultaneously.

Introduction

Librarians in tenure-track faculty positions have responsibilities beyond basic librarianship. At East Carolina University, for example, tenure-track librarians are expected to publish in scholarly journals, present at conferences, and demonstrate service to the profession on a local, state, and national level. Many librarians find the publishing process and professional presentations stressful.

The authors are tenure-track librarians at Joyner Library at East Carolina University (ECU). At Joyner Library, tenure-track positions require 70-80% teaching, 10-15% service, and 10-15% research. For librarians at ECU, teaching is synonymous with job responsibilities, which also include daily work activities such as cataloging, reference work, instruction, and administrative duties. Service to the profession can be completed on many levels, including service to the library, campus, state associations, and national associations. Research options include poster sessions, conference presentations, and publishing in professional and peer-reviewed library science journals. Publishing multiple times in peer-reviewed journals is essential to meeting the tenure requirements.

East Carolina University's tenure process takes seven years to complete. The process consists of annual personnel evaluations, reappointment decisions at the end of the second and fourth years, and an application for tenure early in the sixth year. Each reappointment decision requires written evidence submitted to the tenure committee to illustrate contributions to teaching, service to the profession, and scholarship. Cumulative documentation is compiled in a personnel action dossier, which is submitted to a committee of all tenured faculty members, who vote on the materials for reappointment evaluations and the tenure decision. The final dossier is due at the beginning of the sixth year in order to allow time for the final tenure vote and a job search if the application is unsuccessful. The tenure decision requires votes from the library's tenure committee, the dean of libraries, and university administration. ECU's tenure process is documented in Appendix D of the Faculty Code (ECU Faculty Senate 2007). Other libraries have similar tenure and promotion requirements.

For academic librarians with tenure-track faculty status, tenure requirements must be fulfilled over and above the normal duties of librarianship. The models for obtaining tenure vary, but the most common elements for evaluation are librarianship (sometimes called teaching), service, and publication. Faculty for whom scholarly publication is required often find that it can assume an enormous presence in their work life. Librarians tend to have longer work weeks than teaching faculty and are less likely to begin their careers with a strong research agenda and research experience. According to Mitchell and Swieszkowski, (1985) despite the stress tenure requirements may cause, most tenure-track librarians' tenure applications are successful (p. 253). Although most librarians have 12 month contracts, rather than the 9 month contracts of teaching faculty, they find time for both librarianship and scholarship.

Literature Review

There are a significant number of publications on tenure for academic librarians dating back to W.E. Henry's 1911 article, "The academic standing of college library assistants and their relation to the Carnegie Foundation." The contemporary discourse on tenure for academic librarians tends either to survey the current situation, to discuss problems with the system, or to offer advice for success.

Park and Riggs' (1991) extensive survey on librarians with faculty status found that at 85 percent of their institutions, these librarians are evaluated on research and scholarship. Nevertheless, lack of publication was not a common reason for tenure denial (p. 285). Welch and Mozenter (2006) observed that less than 50 percent of academic librarians are eligible for tenure and that only tenure can ensure "(1) full participation in university governance, enhancing the library's role in academe; (2) academic freedom; and full opportunity for professional growth" (p. 174). The impact of publication on tenure is debated. Mitchell and Swieszkowski (1985) found that lack of publication was the most frequent reason for tenure denial (p. 235). However, Mitchell and Reichel (1999) discussed the problems of research and publication for academic librarians and came to the same conclusion as Park and Riggs: The lack of publication record was not a common cause for tenure denial among librarians (p. 237). Both studies noted high rates of tenure success for academic librarians.

The most common form of support for the tenure process in library literature is the formal mentoring program in which tenured faculty members provide support and advice for tenure-track librarians. , an example of which is Louisiana State University (LSU) Libraries' formal mentoring program. The program began in fall 1998 to help tenure-track librarians meet the requirements of tenure and promotion (Kuyper-Rushing, p. 440). The mentoring committee created an extensive plan for both mentors and mentees. All tenure-track librarians were required to participate but could not be mentored by a supervisor or someone in their department (p. 442). The program began with an expert-led workshop on developing the skills needed for a successful mentoring relationship, including interpersonal skills, developing a mentoring contract, the art of mentoring, evaluation techniques, and the role of self-leadership in the process (p. 442-3).

Miller and Benefiel (1998) advocate the support group as a strategy for success and a way to cope with challenges to the formal mentoring model. The major challenges potential mentees face include finding someone willing to serve as a mentor and whether or not the mentor has enough time to contribute to the relationship (p. 261). The challenges of formal mentoring and the benefits of working with peers led librarians in the Sterling C. Evans Library at Texas A&M University to create the Tenure Support Group. The group met monthly for "brown-bag" lunches, open to all librarians, which included informal discussions and invited presentations (p. 262). Some of the positive effects of participating in the group included the opportunity to share common experiences and anxieties, meeting colleagues, learning about colleagues' research, getting feedback on projects, how to participate in professional development, finding

colleagues interested in collaboration, providing a welcoming group for new faculty members, and attending high-quality presentations (p. 264).

Level and Mash's (2004) peer mentoring program at Colorado State University Libraries (CSUL) furthers the evolution of peer support in the tenure process. They define peer mentoring as "an approach to pair an inexperienced person with a knowledgeable individual or group of the same status" (p. 304). Level and Mash (2004) observe the importance of developing relationships with peers in "overcoming the feelings of loneliness and isolation that new campus employees often face" (p. 305.) However, the major drawback of peer mentoring is the limited experience of the collaborators. Kathleen M. Quinlan (1999) postulates that "even junior members of an organization have experience, information, skills, knowledge, and perspectives which will be helpful to peers" (p. 35).

The CSUL peer mentoring group closed the gap between the formal mentoring program and the responsibilities faced by a growing number of new tenure-track librarians (p. 307). Initially, the "juniors" met once a month during regular work hours but later transitioned to quarterly meetings. Agendas included formal presentations by tenured and tenure-track librarians as well as informal discussion sessions (p. 307). Members of the peer mentoring program at CSUL experienced many of the same benefits discussed by Miller and Benefiel such as creating research ideas, providing an arena for open discussions, and improving communication amongst all faculty (p. 308).

A Model for Collaborative Research

This collaborative research model provides a way to manage the research responsibilities of the tenure process between peer collaborators which can work for small or large groups in one or more libraries. The four steps include planning for collaboration, setting a meeting schedule, organizing with a wiki, and completing a project. This model was developed as a result of the authors' research experience in which one author was new to the tenure process and the other was new to the profession. It has been used successfully by the authors since November 2008. In that time, the authors have given two regional conference presentations, completed and submitted two papers to peer-reviewed journals, and been accepted for a poster session at a national ALA conference.

Prior to developing this technique, the authors considered research the most intimidating part of the tenure process. Selecting a topic and initiating a project were particularly daunting. The authors emulated two colleagues' method of meeting weekly to work on a research paper. A research project idea emerged and project development started in earnest after a few brainstorming meetings.

Plan for Collaboration

Research partners should develop a collaboration agreement to clearly outline expectations for the partnership. There are several things to consider when creating a collaboration agreement. First, determine who will be participating in the collaboration and how long the commitment will last. One option is to work on a single project and then reevaluate the arrangement later. Next, decide how and where you will meet, for instance at your local coffee shop weekly or via Skype once a month. The authors found it useful to meet away from their offices in order to avoid distractions. Be aware that the agreement might change over time but establishing it at the outset gives the participants a clear starting point.

Set a Meeting Schedule

Choose a meeting schedule that works for all members. Robert Boice (2000) and Paul J. Silvia (2007), in their books of advice to new professors, credit methodical work as the number one indicator for publishing success. Consider scheduling meetings a semester in advance to avoid future conflicts. Regular meetings encourage productivity and steady progress toward research goals. It helps to compartmentalize research to working meetings, thereby reducing anxiety about the research process at other times. The authors agreed on two-hour meetings every Friday morning, and additional meetings were only rarely needed. If sessions are frequently rescheduled, the meeting time should be renegotiated by the collaborators.

Sometimes it is necessary to do homework outside of the meeting. In order to reduce questions about how much homework to complete, predetermine a quantifiable amount of work to be accomplished outside of the meeting, (e.g., read for two hours, write a certain number of pages, etc.). This technique reduces guilt about how much to accomplish outside a meeting and it will help collaborators determine when they have completed their homework. Occasionally, a meeting will start slowly or take a while to get into a productive rhythm. If this happens, continue working on the project, and eventually a sluggish start will transform into an effective working session. If a session is still ineffective, a walk may help to clear the mind. Some of the meetings for which the authors felt the least enthusiasm later proved to be the most productive.

Weekly meetings are helpful to alleviate stress, keep the work load evenly distributed, and keep projects on track. Compartmentalizing projects during the meetings allowed the authors to focus on work outside of the meetings and avoid unneeded concern over research projects. The workload was explicitly and evenly divided because work was completed only during meetings or as occasional homework assignments. The method required the authors to be accountable to one another and to the collaboration agreement.

Organize with a Wiki

The next step is to organize the project. There are multiple ways to do this. The authors' project management solution came in the form of a wiki. Wikis are web-based, have the capacity to upload and store documents, and most important, their content is separate from other work documents. As reference librarians, the authors worked at computers in the office, at the reference desk, or at home; therefore, it was important not to be tied to a specific location. The wiki's uploading feature provided a place to store project information, and the documents could then be accessed from anywhere with an internet connection. It was important to keep the research planning documents separate from other work in order to compartmentalize projects into research meetings.

The wiki acted as a repository for ideas, current projects, deadlines, and calls for research. It provided a record of what was done, project agreements, and plans for the future. The wiki's homepage included the main schedule, links to ideas, and links to each project. The schedule included final due dates for each project, due dates of calls for proposals, and long term plans. New research ideas were always recorded in the wiki. Whenever a research project was informally discussed, the ideas were recorded no matter how insignificant they seemed at the time. Any further discussions on a previous idea were also added. Many of the informal conversations eventually evolved into research projects. Each project was linked from the homepage and had multiple subpages with a to-do list, schedule, ideas, and final products.

As a result of this exhaustive record, projects could be put on hold and returned to later without confusion. It was surprising to rediscover ideas that were recorded during a research meeting and subsequently forgotten. Without the wiki, this information could have been lost. This record provided a tool for managing multiple projects simultaneously and reduced questions about the feasibility of a new project. It made it easy to tell if there was time for a new commitment.

Complete a Project

The final step is to complete the research project. The most effective way to finish projects is by creating and adhering to deadlines. The authors conceptualized deadlines as either macro or micro. Macro deadlines are the major deadlines of a project. For example, the completion of an entire section of a research paper. In order to complete a major deadline, numerous micro deadlines must be met, such as writing individual paragraphs, citing a quotation, and proof reading. This method helped to subdivide the deadlines for a project and kept track of every detail. The satisfaction of completing deadlines, no matter how small, helped encourage the completion of a project. At each meeting, the authors reviewed the prioritized list of micro deadlines produced from the previous week. The micro deadline determined what projects would be discussed at the current meeting.

It should be noted that deadlines are a balancing act. Ideally, there should be progress toward completing a micro deadline each meeting. At the same time, collaborators should be flexible. Always try to meet a project goal, but be aware when something needs more time to develop, at which point you should extend the deadline. Keeping an updated schedule allowed the authors to plan projects and to know clearly if a project was on schedule. A major portion of the authors' success is because of their adherence to the planned schedule. Even on days when inspiration waned, sticking to the schedule meant that something was always accomplished.

Conclusion

This collaboration method provides numerous benefits. A peer partnership is a boon to research productivity because the collaborators are accountable to each other and to the collaboration agreement. Regular meetings encourage output and methodical progress toward tenure goals. A wiki is an effective project management tool. It is a repository for ideas, current projects, deadlines, and calls for research. It keeps a record of what was done, project agreements, and plans for the future. An updated schedule provides a blueprint for planning projects and sticking to the schedule lays the groundwork for success. The routinization of the research and writing process results in less stress and greater productivity.

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