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What Does It Take to Get Tenure?

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WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO GET TENURE?

Annabelle Foos, Mary Anne Holmes and Suzanne O'Connell

Data from the National Science Foundation and the American Geological Institute indicate that women geoscientists remain underrepresented at all levels in academia. In addition, the proportion of women geoscience faculty declines with increasing rank, from around 20 percent as assistant professors to 5 percent as full professors.

In 2001, we began a project to collect information that can help mentor women faculty early in their geoscience careers and improve their chances of obtaining tenure. We also wanted to provide institutions with information on retention, tenure and promotion procedures and criteria as they are practiced across the country.

The Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln sent a survey to the chairs of all U.S. geoscience departments. The survey consisted of questions that assessed what the relative weights were of research, teaching, service and other activities when an academic is judged for tenure. They distributed 628 questionnaires, of which 321 were returned. Of those surveys returned, 280 were complete and provided useful data for this study. Some surveys were returned unanswered and some institutions stated that they did not have tenure and promotion plans, so these were not included in the analysis.

The responses came from a broad spectrum of institutions, ranging from two-year community colleges to major research universities. Department chairs were asked to rate the relative importance of various cri-

### Teaching excellence
All of the institutions considered course evaluations as a means of evaluating teaching and 76 percent rated them as very important. Course enrollments and alumni recommendations were rated as the least significant criteria (see chart, top of next page).

### Activity importance
Responses to the question, “how much weight does your department place on the following types of activities?” varied widely. The most common responses gave equal weight to teaching and research and less emphasis on service. Four percent of the departments place more than 80 percent weight on teaching, and less than 1 percent do not consider teaching when evaluating a tenure candidate. In contrast, 6 percent of the departments do not consider research when evaluating a candidate for tenure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF ACTIVITY</th>
<th>AVERAGE WEIGHT %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEACHING</td>
<td>47.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SERVICE</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Research excellence
Criteria for the documentation of excellence in research were divided into two categories, publications and funding. Seventy-four percent of the departments require faculty to publish in refereed journals in order to receive tenure. Twenty-seven percent of the departments have guidelines that specify the number of publications required for tenure. For these departments, the number of required publications ranged from 1 to 12 with an average of 3.7. Not surprisingly, publications in national and international journals were rated the highest, with 87 percent of the department chairs indicating they are very important.

In the funding category, 41 percent of the departments require that faculty generate research funding in order to receive tenure. Only 6 percent of the departments specify a specific number of proposals or dollar amounts. The number of grants these departments require ranged from one to three. Specific dollar amounts ranged from $10,000 to $500,000 with an average of $162,000. Federally funded grants that generate overhead were rated the highest, followed by competitive grants from research foundations and federally funded equipment grants (see chart, bottom of next page).
teria that are typically used to document excellence in teaching, research and service. Not surprisingly, three-quarters of the department chairs rated course evaluations, publication in national and international journals, and obtaining federally funded grants as being very important.

One of the first things a new faculty member should do is to determine the relative weight of those criteria in their own department. It is also important to consider that within one department there can be a range of expectations. As an example, it is not uncommon for major research universities to hire a faculty member whose major responsibilities are predominantly teaching or predominantly research.

New faculty should focus their energies on activities that are rated as most significant by the department chairs. This is not to say they should not do some of the activities that were not rated as significant, as those activities often lead to research opportunities. For example, internal institution grants provide seed money that can eventually lead to a federally funded grant.

Networking activities such as organizing a symposium or publishing in a symposium volume, though rated as less significant, are essential to establishing a good reputation in the field. Also important to consider is the return on investment of time. Writing a textbook is only considered moderately significant, despite the fact that it requires a significant investment of time and energy. It would be better to spend that energy on a few refereed publications and save writing the textbook until after receiving tenure.

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