

Tenure Strategies

or

How to survive the first six years of academic life

David Wood

Associate Professor

Computer Sciences Department

University of Wisconsin

Caveat

- From a recently tenured (Fall '95) faculty member's perspective
- My opinions, based on my experience at Wisconsin
- Some fields work differently from others
- Some universities work differently from others
 - especially smaller teaching colleges

Outline

- Tenure process
- Tenure metrics
 - What are they looking for?
 - What really matters?
- General tenure strategies
 - The lone wolf
 - The random collaborator
 - The empire builder
 - The team builder
- What worked for me
- A few words of advice

Tenure Process

- Department executive committee
 - Annual reappointment reviews
 - Mid-course evaluation (typically 3rd or 4th year)
 - Promotion and tenure review in sixth year
 - Based on dossier and external letters
- Divisional committee (advisory at Wisconsin)
- Dean
- University committee (not Wisconsin)
- Provost, President, Chancellor
- Regents

Tenure Metrics

- Research ← Extremely important
- Teaching ← Moderately important
- Service ← Somewhat important
- Extension/Outreach ← Not important



Wisconsin's
priorities

Find out priorities at your university and your department

The Research Metric

IMPACT!

- Change the way people do things in your field
 - the way people think
 - the methods they use
 - directions of others future research
- Influence on relevant industry

Measures of research impact

- Letters of evaluation
 - External reviewers
 - Generally senior members in your field
 - Need to identify **specific individual contributions**
- Number of **high-quality** publications
 - Journals
 - Highly-reviewed conferences
- Extramural funding
 - Sufficient to support research program
 - Evidence of fund-raising proficiency
 - Evidence of success in competitive peer-review process

Need to identify **your** specific individual contributions

Service Metrics

- Editorships
- Program committees
- Panels
- Reviewing
- Consulting
- University/College/Department committees

Measure of respect by your peers

Teaching Metrics

- Teaching evaluations
question #8: “Would you recommend the instructor?”
- Teaching awards
- Teaching undergraduates
- Course development
- Supporting letters from students

My opinion: Can hurt you, but is unlikely to help much

General Research Strategies

- The lone wolf
- The random collaborator
- The empire builder
- The team builder

The Lone Wolf

- Performs research primarily by his/her self
 - Small single investigator grants
 - Works with small group of students/postdocs
- Pros
 - + Little difficulty identifying who made contributions
 - + Get all the credit
- Cons
 - Generally limited to smaller research topics/ideas
 - Little leverage; must do most work oneself
 - No feedback from senior/peer collaborators
 - Probably limited impact

The Random Collaborator

- Sequentially collaborate with many different colleagues
 - Small single investigator grants
 - Small team of students/postdocs
- Pros
 - + Potential for significantly greater impact
 - + Leverage colleagues' expertise
 - + Substantial feedback from senior/peer collaborators
- Cons
 - Some difficulty distributing credit
 - Still limited to smaller scale research topics/ideas

The Empire Builder

- Develop and head large research group
 - Larger single investigator grants
 - Large team of students/postdocs/research staff
- Pros
 - + Potential for significantly greater impact
 - + Leverage larger team
 - + Little difficulty distributing credit
- Cons
 - Tremendous amount of management work
 - Requires superior fund raising skills
 - Little feedback from senior/peer collaborators
 - Long startup time

The Team Builder

- Develop collaborative research team
 - Multiple faculty investigators
 - Larger multi-investigator grants
 - Large team of students/postdocs/research staff
- Pros
 - + Potential for significantly greater impact
 - + Leverage expertise of collaborators
 - + Tackle larger research topics/ideas
- Cons
 - Significant management effort (but less than Empire Builder's)
 - Requires better than average fund raising skills
 - Some difficulty identifying individual contributions

My Tenure Experience

- Came to UW in Winter of 1990
- Struggled for first several years
 - Tried the Random Collaborator model
 - One paper in first 2 years
- Switched to the Team Builder model in 1992-1993
 - Joined with two colleagues
 - Formed the “Wisconsin Wind Tunnel” project
 - Received significant funding from NSF and ARPA
 - Published 6 journal and 14 highly reviewed conference papers
 - Additional collaboration with companies and universities
- Granted tenure in Fall ‘95

Issues in my Tenure Case

- Extensive collaboration
 - Most papers and both big grants were with two collaborators
 - I was most junior of the three

Worked hard to differentiate myself

- Limited teaching of undergraduates
 - Had only taught one undergraduate course

Some Advice**

- Pick “real” problems!
 - solve problems someone cares abouts
 - don’t invent a new field
- Strive for multi-investigator multi-disciplinary projects
 - makes it easier to solve real problems
- Match the strengths and weaknesses of your local environment
- Make sure that you are excited enough to work on it for 3-5 years

*. Adapted from David Patterson’s “How to have a Bad Career in Research/Academia”

More Advice*

- Get lots of feedback
 - Send papers out for “pre-review” to your peers
 - Have periodic external project reviews
 - WWT: 2 times per year, 2 days with external visitors
- Work on Technology Transfer
 - Sell your wares in the Marketplace of Ideas
 - Give plenty of talks at universities and companies
 - Get to know, and impress, the big names in your field
- Host department colloquium in your fifth year
 - Invite likely letter writers
- Take the “Tenure Tour”
 - Give talks at likely letter writers’ universities your fifth year

*. Adapted from Mary Jane Irwin’s “The Tenure Process”

Conclusion

- Goal is to have impact:
Change way people do research in your field
- Do “real stuff”
 - Make sure you are solving problems someone cares about
- Feedback is key
 - Seek out and value critics
- Don't be afraid to change course mid-stream
 - Better to adapt than to be wrong
- Differentiate your contributions
 - But not at the expense of having high impact
- Have fun
 - This is what you will be doing for the rest of your life