

How to Build a Strong Tenure File

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Having gone up for tenure at both a large university and a small college, reviewed many tenure files as an outside evaluator, and attended a number of “how to get tenured” workshops, I’ve built this list of suggestions for others. Quote marks denote elements taken directly from University of Missouri or Drake University tenure and promotion guidelines.

First, set up a file box. You will make the folders and sections listed below and house them in this container. Keep it at home. Sadly, there *are* tales of sabotaged tenure materials that had been kept in offices. Consider also keeping a backup at another site—office, parents’ home, friend’s home. The 1993 Midwest floods prompt this caution since my office at Missouri was flooded then.

You need three major sections: RESEARCH, TEACHING, and SERVICE. Each section will contain folders of material. You won’t necessarily submit all these items, but they will form your evidentiary base and help you make the best case you can. It’s also quite surprising six years down the line to learn you needed to keep your class rosters or grading sheets, for instance, at some schools.

Place a PROFESSIONAL ASSIGNMENT AND RESPONSIBILITIES folder up front. It should include all letters of assignment and reappointment and a position description from the advertisement through which you were hired, plus any changes in that description since then.

RESEARCH

Next comes a main heading or division for your RESEARCH. In it, place separate folders for all of the following items:

- “Appointments or awards that require evaluation of professional competence”—anything you win or are appointed to that speaks to your intelligence and abilities (i.e., manuscript reviewer, editorial board, reviewer for campus grant proposals, and, later, things like Academy of XYZ [whatever your field is], plus fellowships and top paper awards).
- Full copies in most final form, with correspondence and judging sheets, of all scholarly work, but know that scholarly books and refereed journal articles are most important at most institutions. Each type of research you

might perform—and save copies of—is listed below in rank order from best to least important:

- books
- book chapters
- refereed journal articles
- refereed conference papers (*keep* the program; this is very important if you have critics on the various committees)
- published abstracts
- successful grant proposals for research
- book reviews for journals

Some schools also give greater credit for proposing and/or organizing any panel at a national academic meeting, especially if it's a research panel.

Other files in this section might include:

- “Invitations to serve as a reviewer or on editorial boards.”
- “Exchanges with other schools.” Did someone ask for a copy of your paper? Does someone want you to speak at their school on your topic? Are you writing research with a colleague from another university? These are always welcome in a tenure file.
- “Acceptances to present refereed research.” Again, keep the letters or use a “print-screen” to capture an e-mail with its date and time stamp.
- Research conferences and other research-related learning experiences (new software, statistics courses).
- Research travel to archives or special collections to conduct interviews.
- Records of service on juries, editorial boards, as discussant or judge of conference papers, including correspondence, *copies of your reviews, and copies of programs.*
- Records of textbook and book reviewing for publishers.
- Contest judging.
- Copies of trade press articles.
- List of broadcast productions, with DVDs/CDs of these.

TEACHING

- Clean copy of final course *rosters* for every course you teach. Some departments require this, and it's quite a nuisance to have to cobble them together as you work on your dossier.
- Clean copy of *every syllabus*. Be sure it lists classroom supervision and office hours devoted to the course.
- Clean copy of final *grade sheets* in each class.
- Summary sheets of quantitative scores on all *course evaluations*. I hope your T&P committee members are savvy enough to realize the statistical anomalies that flaw the typical course evaluation, from poor timing to lack of adequate numbers to achieve any sort of significance, to failure to embed reliability measures and scale reversals.
- Your brief prose summary of student comments and your clear strengths and any teaching innovations from each course.
- Outside indications of your good teaching, such as letters from colleagues exchanging teaching ideas or adopting yours, unsolicited notes and letters from students.
- Correspondence with speakers you bring into class.
- Need I say teaching awards? Rather than awaiting campus-level awards, consider seeking out "teaching ideas" competitions in your field, such as AEJMC's annual GIFT competition. These provide an outside view of your teaching competence that can help steer reviewers away from the "anonymous letter/popularity contest" of course evaluations.
- Keep track of your graduates who liked you as a teacher. Facebook now offers an ideal place to do this. Some schools allow alums to write letters in favor of the promotion.

Sometimes it helps to form a coterie of friends/teachers and review one another's classes periodically. Put those letters into your file also (as recommended in "teaching portfolio" books).

ADVISING (subsidiary of TEACHING)

- List all B.A. advisees.
- List M.A. advisees with thesis or project titles, plus any presentations or articles published from their work that you have coached. Include doctoral and master's advisees.
- Copies of all letters of recommendation and other correspondence on behalf of your students
- Contest entries you do on behalf of your students, with any letters showing awards. *Nothing proves the quality of teaching quite as indisputably as winning national awards with the students' products from a class.*
- Student thank-you notes for your help above and beyond classroom duties.
- Teaching improvement conferences, workshops, or meetings attended.
- Any campus-wide participation in special teaching programs (writing across the curriculum, minority recruitment, high school days).
- Teaching articles you write for your national academic organization meetings, newsletters, or journals.
- Professional internships to improve or extend your skills.
- Faculty development leaves or grants.
- Club advising. (Don't become an ad hoc member of the club; members meet, you only advise.)

SERVICE

Make separate files for department, school, and university service. and set up files in each that include:

- Committees and task forces with years of service, group's accomplishments in those years, and your contributions.

Add additional files as relevant for:

- Administrative appointments (head or assistant director of a lab, etc.).
- Service to the profession (talks, conferences, articles in professional newsletters).
- Service to scholarly and professional organizations (for each, keep records showing offices held, years, accomplishments, thank-you letters, reports submitted, correspondence, newsletters).
- Service on juries for conferences and journals.
- Consulting (but not too much, or you'll be neglecting the rest of your file; also remember there can be a high jealousy factor here).

Finally, you might also jot down ideas for sections your university or school might require, such as teaching philosophy, research agenda, and service accomplishments.

Look for mentors among the tenured faculty at your or other institutions, and ask to review their tenure books. This may give you ideas for other important sections or for how to couch your teaching philosophy, for instance.

Now, as the files begin to fill, watch your own performance. Be sure you are doing enough solid research and haven't been sidetracked into too many of your department's service activities, which are so rarely looked upon as tenurable work by provosts and campus-level committees. If one year's teaching evaluations look weak, take immediate steps to strengthen the course at its weakest points while attending teaching workshops or talks on the subject.

And with these files on hand, you are ready to create your own tenure book the summer before you head into the tenure and promotion process.