

Establishing a Research Agenda

Tomorrow's Research

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Folks:

The posting below looks at various factor to consider in establishing a research agenda. It is from Chapter 4, - Academic Research, by Sharon Ahern Fechter, in the book, *The Full-Time Faculty Handbook* edited by Virginia Bianco-Mathis and Neal Chalofsky. SAGE Publications Ltd, 6 Bonhill Street, London EC2A 4PU, United Kingdom. Copyright © 1999 by Sage Publications, Inc. [www.sagepub.com/] Reprinted with permission.

Regards,

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UP NEXT: Enhancing the Effectiveness of TA Office Hours

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----- 1,694 words -----

Establishing a Research Agenda

A crucial first step in establishing a research agenda is to define clearly your purposes for researching and for publishing that research. These will undoubtedly change as you progress through your career or even as you move from institution to institution. If this kind of mobility is in the cards for you, establish your agenda accordingly.

In fact, it might be wise to focus on the portability of your research in any case. Faculty have noticed a growing and troublesome (for some) trend among some departments and institutions to plac faculty on contract lines instead of on tenure lines. One faculty member in this situation at a large private research institution notes that the fact that she will never be afforded the opportunity to stand for tenure is problematic: "It raises many interesting questions regarding my status in the school and my feelings about my job." It also affects her research agenda and her level of willingness to participate in administrative activities - efforts that could be of less value should she seek a tenure-track slot at another institution and that rob valuable time and energy from pursuing her research. This faculty member's advice to new faculty is to tell them to organize their activities so that they are never trapped. That means that they should publish consistently in quality publications, that they can produce good to average student reviews, and, if working with doc students, they move them through at a regular pace.

We are bogged down with administrative duties. It is like a very big trap that new faculty get caught in (particularly because senior faculty, who don't want to administer, give the new people the tasks). My recommendation is that you will need to do some administration, but it should never overshadow the teaching or publishing activities. No faculty member at ____ will ever be promoted or tenured without a solid publication record. While teaching is talked about, it alone will not carry a decision.

On the same issue, Whicker, Kronenfeld, and Strickland (1993) advise,

Do not try to run the university or your department until you have tenure.... Your first priority should be to your own research and teaching, preferably performing service activities that are related to your own unique expertise. For those tenure candidates with ambitions of a career in university administration, much time remains after the tenure is approved to run the department, college, and university. (pp. 141-142).

Another consideration is the scope and intensity of your research. If your research is intimately linked with the very specific mission of a particular institution or within a very narrow specialization within a specific field (the scalpel model - see Whicker et al., 1993, pp. 76 ff.), you may be limiting your future career moves: "Develop a marketable record.... The best strategy...is to develop a record of professional productivity that would be appreciated and tenured at a wide array of institutions, not just your own current institution" (p. 143).

Research and personal passions ideally go hand in hand, and it is a happy circumstance when these coincide with the agenda, both overt and implicit, of your institution. That is frequently not the case, however. So adjust the fit as best you can. If you are a first-year faculty member whose primary motivation is to be granted tenure, make sure that you fully understand the research expectations, both within your department and within your institution. Talk to current and former members of promotion and tenure committees and review recent successful cases.

In periodically reviewing the requirements with your department chair or academic dean, you may find that tenure committee members' assessments differ from those of administrators, particularly new administrators who are trying to forge new paths. If an administrator tells you that publishing on the Web, for example, is exactly the kind of innovative scholarship that the department needs, yet members of the tenure committee clearly regard this with skepticism, you may want to be sure you include more traditional research venues in your agenda. In some institutions, administrators come and go with some frequency, and tenure committees may be more stable and less likely to change. In any case, it is a good idea to seek a mentor on the senior faculty (preferably one who is sufficiently self-assured to not be paranoid about your stealing her or his intellectual insights) to help guide your research agenda and to help you navigate the political waters.

Make an effort to understand the nature and mission of your institution. If you are at a large research university, accept the fact that you will be expected to publish books and numerous scholarly articles in first- and second-tier refereed journals, that single authorship (in many disciplines) may be preferable to joint authorship, and that, in the final analysis, publications will probably weigh more heavily than either teaching or service. One faculty in a humanities discipline at a large research university notes that her chances of getting promoted are zero without a book.

On the other hand, many institutions define themselves primarily as teaching institutions, where research expectations are (theoretically!) reduced. Although such a vision may expand the avenue of publication you are open to pursue, don't be lulled into a false sense of security. Many faculty contend that a public posture focusing on excellence in teaching is confusing at best and little more than lip service at worst. Even in instances where there is a stated focus on teaching and current administrative support for this posture, the minimum expectation for promotion and tenure may ultimately include publications. One untenured faculty member at a small teaching institution expressed concern that a change in leadership could "change the rules" and thereby negatively affect her chances of getting tenure. A faculty member at a small comprehensive university notes that although there is a stated focus on excellence in teaching for promotion and tenure, "it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for either."

With fewer and fewer tenure slots available as colleges and universities shift to short- and long-term contracts, the competition is increasing for these tenure-track positions. The quality and quantity of your research may tip the scales in your favor.

The literature suggests, in fact, that research expectations are increasing everywhere and that longevity of quality service in the classroom and at the institution in general is, in and of itself, unlikely to result in the granting of tenure. What teaching institutions may afford, however, is the opportunity to have research that closely links teaching to scholarship be more highly valued in the tenure and promotion process. An untenured faculty member from a teaching institution notes that although some publication is necessary, "the order of preference is teaching, service, and then research," and textbooks and materials development are valued as part of the research expectation.

Quality materials development in the form of textbooks or survey texts that incorporate current disciplinary advances with innovative teaching techniques could, in this scenario, count as much or more than journal articles. Research and scholarly activity that focus on pedagogy may also be more highly valued. In the early stages of your academic career, take the time to know your institution, decide whether it's a fit with your personal and professional goals, and plan your research agenda accordingly (see Figure 4.1).

Successful midcareer academicians enjoy an enviable freedom in pursuing their research. Once the concern about tenure has been removed from the list of motivations, the research world is literally your oyster. Now is the time to pursue interdisciplinary and joint (if this was frowned on in the pretenure stage) projects, to write the great American textbook or novel, to plunge into the depths of cyberspace. Now you can begin to take risks, redefine your personal vision of the relationship between research and teaching - branch out! The faculty member who was unable to participate in writing this handbook because his dean told him it was too far afield to further his tenure case might reconsider his options at midcareer.

As a senior faculty member, take the time to mentor the junior faculty member seeking your guidance. You can be instrumental in helping to establish a probationary faculty's research agenda and helping that person navigate the political waters of the department and the institution. This collaborative relationship can provide a most satisfying capstone to your own personal research agenda as you further the dissemination of knowledge in your field. Possibilities for innovation and risk taking are never greater.

Finally, keep your agenda flexible. Just as other working professionals are likely to experience several career or job changes in the course of a working lifetime, you too may find yourself seeking alternate opportunities. It can be useful to explore a variety of research venues at various points in your career. Doing so expands your horizons as well as your network. Periodically take some time to do an environmental scan of your field and the profession, as well as of your individual department and institution. Stay current regarding trends and future directions in higher education and adjust your agenda accordingly. At all levels, engage your students in your research. This practice carries a number of benefits: The student gains training in research methodology; you gain valuable assistance; and, perhaps most important, you stay in touch with higher education's primary constituency (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.1 Research Agenda

Rank in order of importance, desirability, fit, and reality for you and your institution.

- Book
- Textbook
- Edited book
- Bibliography
- Article in refereed scholarly journal
- Article in refereed practical journal
- Published review- Article in scholarly association newsletter
- Article in the popular press
- Web-based or electronic activity
 - Article in e-journal (many are now peer reviewed)
 - Web page creation
 - Syllaweb
 - Materials development
 - Scholarly database
 - On-line monographs
 - Conversations, MOOs, MUDs


Figure 4.2 Faculty Research Tips

- Know your institution
- Establish a research agenda
- Educate yourself on trends in higher education
- Read practical publications
- Network
- Discuss your research with colleagues in your institutions
- Don't get bogged down in administrative duties
- Avoid vanity presses
- Make sure your research is portable

- Involve your students in your research

References

Whicker, M.L., Kronenfeld, J.J., & Strickland, R.A. (1993). Getting tenure. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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