

Panel: How to Prepare for Promotion

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The fact that you are in a tenure-track position says that you have already done much to prepare for promotion: most institutions want their hires to succeed in the position. So, congratulations to you! And congratulations to your institution for hiring you!

But you still need to work towards tenure and promotion and then the subsequent promotion to full professor.

Why do we have this time-consuming process of promotion? The point is to give you validation for your professional work, validation that you are doing something worth doing, and that you are appreciated by the external world. At the same time, promotion of individuals is an examination and validation of the institution that it has the right people actively doing good things. So, you are not the only entity getting evaluated or getting feedback on its workings! Institutions grow and adapt from evaluating their hires.

Promotion is a serious matter, enough to be somewhat stressed about it. Self-doubts creep in, you work hard and long hours, you want to submit two papers this summer, and you agreed to organize a conference.... You have a certain tenaciousness, curiosity, drive, you do not stop at a job half done... But I want to stress that you should not be only about serious work, I hope that you enjoy your work and that you should take time to enjoy life! You might ask me if enjoying work and life is now a new requirement for tenure? No, it is not something directly for your portfolio, but you want to be a wholesome person, so that you can stay in your endeavors for the long haul. Take time for yourself. I'll push this joyfulness a little further - when you are putting together your promotion portfolio, you may have an idea of how many papers in what venues and how many conference talks you need, but this joyfulness is only to be measured by you inside (or possibly by other people you snap at when you are overworked). I do hope for you and for the world that on average you feel content with what you are doing.

On a related matter, about thirty years ago, my husband and my sister, in different parts of the world, were both in the software industry, working very long hours and weekends. It seemed to be the thing to do. But when my sister moved to Switzerland for a new software job, her new

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boss told her to work at most five days a week, preferably four, and that she should work at most eight hours a day and be efficient during that time. I still find this outlook on work very refreshing: work when you can be efficient, then take time off and refresh. I also learned from my German collaborator to work well during the day and to spend evenings with others or reading good books. My hours are longer, but I do take substantial down time.

Promotion is not a given, of course, you need to put in much work. Research matters most (I am in mathematics). I break down my more detailed advice below into several subgroups, Publications, Funding, Service and Teaching.

Publications

One of the biggest research validation markers are publications. You need to know what counts in your discipline. In some disciplines, journal papers carry the most weight, in some it is conference proceedings, in some books. In some subdisciplines, they write longer papers than in others; in some they publish with lesser frequency. All this contributes to the fact that at most institutions, promotions are not about candidates competing against each other, but we only consider the merits of each individual. But do know what counts in your discipline and publish accordingly. And it is fine to publish some items that count for less!

Professional habits change, and I find it very refreshing when somebody does something quite outside the norms! (Examples are of computer science research in mathematics departments and other departments in the 1980s, 1990s, eventually leading to departments of Computer Science; or before that it was Statistics and before that Physics, but there were also minor revolutions in specific departments that did not result in major new disciplines, such as algebraic statistics.) But some work outside the norm is not acceptable, perhaps at least not until tenure. When research leads you down a new modality, you just may be a trailblazer for something different and powerful but do talk to your mentors and your department head whether you should pursue that at your current stage.

Publish consistently, at pretty good quality. The important words here are “consistently” and “good”. Nobody really counts the number of papers when it is past some threshold, but the papers should not be all in the first few years or in the last few years in your tenure-track job, and there should be some really good papers in the mix that make you proud. (You should be proud of all papers, but more of some of them.). Universities want to see consistency at pretty good or better quality. Not every paper can be or should be ground-breaking. Sometimes you have a minor result that should nevertheless be published for accumulation of knowledge. Do publish it.

Another reason for why you should be publishing some minor papers is the following cautionary true tale #1: Do not work exclusively on the hardest problem in your discipline without publishing anything until the big picture is revealed. --- This is a gamble, and I have seen this attitude destroy at least one promising research career (and I have heard of a few others). This attitude is akin to taking an exam and focusing solely on the one extra hard problem. Do the more easily doable problems first, publish those. While you are working on the easier problems, the back of your mind may still be on the hard problem and solving the easier problems can build up your repertoire of methods, it does build connections in your head and in publications.

So, publish consistently and at pretty good quality. Aim for higher-impact journals. Your articles will not be published in the higher-end journals if you do not submit to them. You may receive rejections, do not dwell on rejections, thoughtfully incorporate the feedback from the referees and editors, then submit to the next journal.

About writing: take time to write your papers and grant proposals. Finish the writing, then set it all aside for two weeks. When you come back to it with fresh eyes, you will be able to improve the presentation, clarify the meaning... Then set it aside again, repeat improving as necessary. Yes, professional papers need to be written well for their intended audience. Referees get annoyed by repeated careless writing and may reject your paper or your grant proposal on that basis. You cannot blame them for it.

I mentioned consistency in publishing. But there are some exceptions to this. Maybe you will become a parent and will have nights without much sleep, maybe you or somebody in your family will get ill, this pandemic is disrupting how we function and is affecting some people more than others. It is understandable that your productivity takes a dive. For much of my pregnancy and several months afterwards, my brain seemed to have left me, I could not remember words, I could not remember proofs of easy exercises, it was horrible, especially since everybody else's kid slept through the night, ate and needed changes on a regular schedule, ... or so they said, and I believed them. Anyway, do have life, family, do not postpone having children indefinitely, well, if you want them! And having a child taught me to be much more efficient in my in-between times.

Funding

Do apply for funding. In some disciplines no work can be done without funding, in others it is an important validation that allows you to do more than otherwise, to get access to resources, to travel to conferences.... Writing grant proposals gives you an opportunity to step back and evaluate your accomplishments and future directions. So do apply for funding, and you may want to seek out multiple venues and get ideas for where else to use your ideas.

Cautionary tale #2: Carefully follow the instructions - grant proposals get rejected simply for not following the instructions, no matter how brilliant your ideas are.

Most applications are through the university offices rather than on your own; those offices need time to do their bit as well, so give them plenty of time to process your proposal (as well as proposals of everybody else on a given day). There may be some back and forth with the office on proper wording, and if you do not give them enough time, they will not be able to transmit their feedback to you, and your grant may be rejected for technicalities. (This is cautionary tale #3.)

Once you are successful for a grant, you may be invited to be a reviewer of grants in subsequent years. Serving on grant panels gives you even more insight into what makes grant applications successful. For your first applications do rely on you mentors.

Something else about grant writing: You want to convey that your ideas are great, promising, on the cutting edge, but you should not use these words! Instead, convey all that with the content of your proposal, backed by your prior accomplishments.

Do not exaggerate your accomplishments in your grant proposals, papers, CV, promotion portfolio. Exaggeration invites and calls for further scrutiny.

Professional service

Professional service includes reviewing and refereeing articles. This work is usually done anonymously so you do not get explicit credit for it. Nevertheless, do it, and do it well and do it promptly. One benefit is that it forces you to read carefully somebody else's work, you learn their methods, their focus, what still needs to be done in that area. This can benefit your own research. (But of course, be a responsible researcher and do not tweak the results that you are reading and publish them as your own!) Another reason for prompt refereeing is the long-term goal of getting on editorial boards. Members of editorial boards should be well organized and responsive to incoming submissions and referees; being a prompt and professional referee offers an indication of whether you can be on the editorial board.

Be professional with your reports, even when recommending a rejection. Stick to facts, do not insult the whole sub-subdiscipline for existing. And do not accept every submission either! You were asked to referee because of your expertise, use it to be good and fair.

Organize conferences, special sessions at the meetings of your professional society, invite speakers there and also to speak in your department. Cultivate potential mentors and potential letter writers at other institutions.

Be visible! Make yourself visible. Give great talks at conferences. People are more likely to remember great talks (or really bad talks, but those are in a different memory bucket). When going to a conference, look ahead of time who else will be there. Have you read one of their papers recently and do you have some contributing questions? Do you have a follow-up idea? Talk to them at the conference. They may like your ideas and invite you for a visit at their institution or to collaborate with them. You cannot simply go up to a professor and say that you would like to be invited to their institution or to a conference. You need to give them reasons to make them want to invite you. You want to convey that you are great and that you are a visitor with high potential, without using those words.

Back in the old days we would bring stacks of paper preprints and reprints to conferences and distribute them, possibly with some words of explanation: "This is related to your paper on X." Now we are more likely to send emails with links to arXiv papers, and explicitly marking the connection with recipients' interests. It is a lot easier to deal with links than stacks of papers, but make sure to convince your audience that they really want to click on the link, that there is something of very high interest to them in there.

In short, make yourself and your work seen. Enlist your mentors to help you be visible. Make it known that you would like to give a talk at institution X, that you would like to be an editor, or serve on a specific national organization office.

In addition to seeking connections with potential mentors and letter writers, do cultivate also connections with professional peers at other institutions. What opportunities and activities and conferences are they working on? What opportunities are open for you? Collaborations on specific disciplinary projects are great, and you can also have camaraderie projects, important for one's well-being and perspective.

Department service

Be a good citizen of the department and of the university too. In your first few years you are not likely to be asked to serve on much, but once you know the needs and strengths and deficiencies, do contribute. If you agree to serve on a committee, do not be just a passive observer collecting CV items. Committees usually need to accomplish some work, do help the team.

Departments thrive on new energy from new hires! New hires are doing refreshing new research, teach in refreshing new ways, have great professional service ideas... But, beware: do not tell your department soon upon your arrival that you know better than they how to do things, or worse. Some departments are more open to change than others, but you may want to do some observing first and bring in your suggestions judiciously.

Mentoring

Mentoring can be very enriching. As professors, we have power and knowledge and experience that can make a difference in a young person's life. Most of us had (perhaps unwitting) mentors who told us this or that which then helped our career. We can pay it forward. If you agree to mentor someone, do it mindfully; do not be just a passive observer collecting CV items.

But do write about your mentoring activities in your CVs and in your annual reviews.

I repeat my message from before: do seek mentors for yourself. Most people are willing to mentor in their own department, but getting external mentors may require some special work or luck. Well, make it so that your potential mentor has a good reason to invite you to their institution to give a talk, or have lunch together at a conference, ... Ask specific questions. It is easier to get a flow of advice from someone after a good prompt. Mentoring from outside the department builds networks within the institution or expands discipline-based networks. The Coaching and Resource Network (CRN)¹ at Purdue has an initiative that enables faculty members to select mentors outside their departments and even colleges.

Teaching

You are at your stage of the career because of the inspiring teachers and role models you have had in the past. Pay it forward: be a good teacher. It pays to hone your presentation skills, to elicit the most wonder and curiosity, even to beginner classes, or perhaps especially to beginner classes! Practice that clarity of thought, of the flow... it will help your research and your writing of papers and grants.

Prepare for your classes well. There is no such thing as "overpreparing" for class (just like there is no such thing as "overstudying" for an exam). One bad minute in your class, multiplied by the

¹For details about CRN, see <https://www.purdue.edu/butler/crn-support-circle/crn/index.php>.

number of students present or in absentia, is a lot of wasted time. Each great or good minute in class can make a huge difference in understanding of the specific topic, of the whole class, and of the students' lifetime trajectory. This is a powerful role that teachers play, and it is rewarding to see the students' development.

Summary

Do well in your research, publishing, funding, teaching and service. Make professional connections, seek advice, mentors, professional opportunities. Enjoy your time with that work and also take refreshing time for yourself and your family.