The Influence of Faculty Background on Preparing for Promotion and Tenure

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Diversity in Faculty Backgrounds

Some years ago, I was guilty of eavesdropping on a conversation. I was in Ethiopia, working on a research project and staying on the campus of an international research center. At breakfast one morning, a family of four, also visiting, was seated behind me. The two parents at the table were discussing emotions with their children. I listened as they explained how words can affect others. The mother then said, "The server is coming. Why don't you say this to him?" She provided a sentence. The server approached, had a brief exchange with one of the children, and left. The mother asked, "How did he respond when you said that? How do you think that made him feel?"

This conversation was one of the clearest examples in my experience of how families differ. My parents would not have the capacity to bring a spouse and two children on an international work trip, and we certainly never had casual coaching sessions about emotions or influencing others over breakfast. What struck me most were the skills the children were learning at a young age: they were building their vocabulary on emotions and learning how to communicate with others. As an adult, I was still building those skills.

Success in academia requires more than hard work, technical skills, and excellence in research, teaching, and service. Communication, management, leadership, networking, and a host of other skills make a difference during the promotion and tenure process, but they are not taught at any level of schooling. These skills are largely acquired by experience from family, community, and culture. Faculty with different backgrounds, especially those who are immigrants, members of an underrepresented group, first-generation, or from a family with limited resources (socioeconomic status or SES), may enter academia with different pressures, beliefs, and behaviors that can influence their progress through the promotion and tenure process. In this article, I will discuss some tips for promotion and tenure while considering the diversity in faculty backgrounds.

Time and Mental Resources

Much has been written about the need to manage time well. "Protecting" one's time includes regularly scheduling time for activities that are important for promotion and tenure (for most,

research and writing), then using that time as planned, even when other demands arise. If this sounds difficult, note that faculty are very good at rigorously protecting their time for classroom instruction. Similar strategies can be used to protect time for other important activities. Creating a weekly plan with scheduled time for these activities, along with time for meetings and teaching, can be very helpful, and working on important goals on a daily basis, even for a very short amount of time, can reduce stress and lead to progress in the long run.

Many people underestimate the time required for a task, and adding some "grace" into one's schedule can help. Time tracking, which can be done on paper, in a spreadsheet or calendar, or using an app, can be valuable. It provides data on how your time is spent, allowing you to identify when your time use does not align with your goals and priorities and to make adjustments. If this type of data causes stress, it can be helpful to view changes as experimentation. One can make a change in behavior, collect more time use data, and if the change does not improve time use, consider why it did not work and try something else. This data-driven approach to behavior change can be appealing to researchers and can lower the stakes and the stress associated with having inadequate time for priorities.

Productivity, however, is not purely a function of time; attention and focus are also critical. Several strategies exist to maintain focus, such as turning off electronic notifications and scheduling meetings and time replying to emails so that work hours are less fragmented. Keeping larger goals and values in mind is helpful, as ambivalence and lack of clarity can drain energy. Time spent in planning (for the week, month, semester, or longer periods) and periodic reflection on progress take time but are worth it. The tenure track often encourages short-term thinking, but it can be helpful and motivating to create time and space for longer-term plans and strategies.

Some work activities also carry emotional weight, and consequently, they take longer than the hours and minutes recorded on a calendar. Examples of such activities from my research area (global public health) include data collection in malnutrition or maternity wards in low-resource settings, reading qualitative interviews of individuals from disadvantaged groups, and analyzing child mortality data. In teaching, emotional labor is involved in one-on-one interactions with students in need. In service, this is embedded in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. Your own examples will vary, but the additional requirements of such activities are important to consider when deciding to take on new assignments or setting a schedule.

Perfectionism
Perfectionism can stall productivity. One study of psychology professors found that perfectionism was negatively associated with the number of total publications, the number of first-authored publications, the number of citations, and journal impact rating (Sherry et al. 2010). Perfectionism is often not about striving towards excellence; it can be a method for coping with risk and uncertainty. Depending on your background, failure in your job or on the tenure track can have major consequences for your family as well as for you. The response may be to "work harder," even to extremes and an unattainable standard. Most faculty have high endurance, but just because it is possible to work long hours does not mean one should. Not all activities in an academic role have to meet the same high standard. For example, the standard of writing typically required differs between a journal article, a routine document for a departmental

committee, and an email. Selectively relaxing some standards can lead to greater productivity with low risk.

Mentoring
Mentorship is vital in an academic career, and you are not limited to only one mentor. Each faculty member has a variety of needs, and everyone is busy, so it can help to have a network of mentors. You may have some people you contact when you need advice on a new research direction, and a different person with whom you discuss the design of a new course. Reaching out to new potential mentors can be difficult, and run counter to personal inclinations or cultural upbringing. However, mentors can be a valuable source of information, including the "unwritten rules" of your department or institution, direct you to new opportunities, and advocate for you when you are not in the room. Peers (including those at other institutions) can also serve as mentors and provide opportunities for accountability as you each work toward your goals. If you have not previously had much support or mentoring, you may be less aware of your needs or the support available to you. Talking to others can help.

However, developing relationships in the workplace, mentoring or otherwise, requires some degree of self-disclosure. This is another activity that people from minority and underrepresented groups may tend to avoid, as it can draw potentially negative attention to your differences from the larger group. However, self-disclosure can also be beneficial: it can help build stronger relationships and make you more included, allow people to get to know you, help them remember you when an opportunity arises, and advocate for you in an informed way (Harvard Business Review 2018). Institutions can support faculty by making mentoring the norm for all faculty at all ranks, and formal mentoring programs can address specific needs of faculty. At Purdue University, for example, the Butler Center's Coaching and Resource Network (CRN) aims to provide mentoring for faculty who may be isolated, face unique challenges that may not be disclosed within a department or college, or are otherwise needing support (Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence 2022).

Health and Well-being
Health needs change over time. Often, discussions of health and personal needs, especially for female faculty, revolve around reproduction. However, pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood are not the only personal issues that faculty face. Some faculty will struggle with infertility or pregnancy loss, some will have other health concerns, both acute and chronic, and some will need to provide care for children with special needs or for aging relatives (elder care). For faculty who are immigrants or come from low-resource backgrounds, this may involve providing financial support as well. Some faculty struggle with the "two-body problem" – finding adequate, desired employment for both themselves and their partner – while others struggle to meet new people and establish relationships. Many faculty face mental health challenges. Most of these difficulties are not disclosed in the workplace for fear of how they may be judged, leaving many to juggle burdens with limited or no support.

Prioritizing health, broadly defined as physical, mental, and social well-being (World Health Organization 1946), is key to long-term productivity. Prioritization involves changing behaviors and habits, which can be difficult, especially when time, energy, and "bandwidth" feel limiting. Barriers are valid even when small. For example, you may resolve to exercise at mid-day but not

follow through because it takes too much time to wash, dry, or style your hair before returning to the office. Clearly articulating this as a problem (exercise messes hair, and I need to meet a self- or externally imposed standard of appearance at work), rather than a failure (I did not exercise today), makes it easier to find and experiment with solutions. Academia involves continuous failure: manuscripts are critiqued, grants are rejected. It can be helpful to develop strategies specifically to boost your confidence and mood, such as setting achievable daily goals and allowing yourself repeated small wins or taking time to celebrate small daily successes. Such strategies are beneficial, even after promotion and tenure.

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