

The CEA Forum

Summer/Fall 2009: 38.2

[Next: Making Lemonade](#)

EVERYTHING CHANGES AND NOTHING CHANGES:

LIFE AFTER TENURE

[Kathleen McEvoy](#)



I had one last hurdle to clear before my tenure case was brought before the Washington & Jefferson College Board of Trustees for a vote: a one-on-one meeting with the college president. So far, everything had gone smoothly—my class observations, my outside review, my meeting with the Dean of Faculty. My tenure case was strong—quite strong—and I had never entertained the idea that I would not be granted tenure. Still, there was no reason to get cocky. Dr. Haring-Smith could be a tough cookie, and I would be a fool to go into the interview arrogant or unprepared.

The meeting was pleasant, no trick questions, no hardball tactics. It was more of a discussion of the changes I had seen in my six years at W&J and what I thought the college needed now. We talked at length about the college's writing requirement and the possibility of creating a dedicated writing center. Then Dr. Haring-Smith shifted the direction of the conversation and hit me with, "So how will your relationship with the college change if you're granted tenure?"

Hmm... It was a question I should have anticipated but for some reason had not. With nothing prepared, I was forced to answer honestly: "It won't."

There was an odd "Excuse me?" moment, and then Dr. Haring-Smith asked me to elaborate.

I explained that even before setting foot on W&J's campus, I'd already been made to feel like an integral part of the college. I served on a task force (or "working group," as it was called back then) before classes even began. My second year I was appointed to one of the college's most demanding governance committees. By my fifth year I was holding three administrative positions, in addition to my regular departmental and committee service. Yes, they were relatively minor positions, only one had a course release, but, still, it was a lot of responsibility for a junior faculty member. I'd also helped to create an interdisciplinary program. The year before my tenure review, I was elected to the Faculty Executive Committee as its untenured faculty representative. In six years, I'd established excellent relationships with faculty across the campus, and I knew I was regarded as a hard-working, reasonable, trustworthy colleague who could be counted on to tackle difficult and complex issues.

How would any of that change if I was granted tenure? Sure, I would be eligible to serve in different capacities, but I'd already forged iron-clad ties to W&J and its people. I'd made myself an important part of the college community. Tenure wouldn't change that.

Before you get annoyed with me, let me explain that all of this did not happen because I'm an incredible, marvelous human being (although I am). Much of my success is a direct result of my department and the college as a whole. My colleagues in English were eager to embrace me from the beginning and had no qualms treating me the same way they treated everyone else. We're a happy, collegial group who feel it is important to be a presence on campus. We assess our strengths and our interests, and insert ourselves as we see fit into virtually every aspect of college governance. Sure, there are a lot of us compared to other departments, but we have proudly become one of W&J's go-to departments. We are well-represented on governance committees and our members are frequently asked to assume other duties on campus. Since I had been there, I had quickly fallen into the department's service-oriented mind-set.

W&J is also a happy, collegial place. With only about 1500 students and roughly 100 full-time faculty members, W&J is intimate and close-knit. Most of the faculty knew who I was within the first week of my first semester, and many went out of their way to introduce themselves and engage me in conversation. Also, in addition to shared governance, we like our shared lunches and receptions and parties—we like to get together and talk and eat and drink. Faculty members across the college attend the school plays, art shows and musical performances. They throw parties. (My department has incredible pot-luck dinners.) W&J is a place that welcomes you, and tenure status is never a factor. By my third-year review, I had worked, drank, and eaten with a large percentage of the college faculty. I was one of them, and I never felt like being untenured mattered all that much.

Once I had tenure, I did not feel different. My relationship with the college did not change. Everything seemed the same as it always had. At least, that's what I thought—for about four months. Or, more precisely, until my first academic year as a tenured faculty member began.

Oh, it started out innocently enough, but I soon began to feel, well, just a bit off. I guess the best description would be post-tenure malaise—a syndrome, I came to learn, that is quite common. You see, for six years, I'd focused intently on doing what I needed to do to gain tenure. I excelled at teaching and threw myself into service, even to the detriment of my scholarship. This was not a problem, though, because at W&J, scholarship is considered a nice addition to a tenure

bid but is certainly not a requirement. Loathe to abandon my scholarship completely, however, I continued to present at conferences and even managed to publish a couple of articles. Though I was certain I would get tenure, when it became official, instead of feeling elated or at least relieved, I felt unfocused and exhausted. I kept asking myself, "Now what?" It didn't take long for me to figure out that I had spent so much time and energy focused on a short-term goal—getting tenure—that I had neglected to plan for the long-term goal, my career.

Sure, I had been doing scholarship, but in a haphazard, slapdash way. My dissertation research (and, to be honest, the general topic) was by now hopelessly out of date. For a variety of reasons, I had branched out in odd directions. Once I looked over my scholarship to date and the commitments I had made over the next year, I realized I had no plan and no evidence of a unified theme to my work. Publications on collaboration, *King Lear*, and Harry Potter? Presentations on professional development, teaching writing, and accreditation? Okay, maybe I'm being too hard on myself—much of my work could be said to fall under the category of "pedagogy." And maybe scholarly diversity is not so bad for someone like me, who teaches a broad range of courses at a small liberal arts college. I'm not a dilettante—I'm a generalist! An ["embedded generalist,"](#) like Colin Irvine.

Still, I couldn't help but feel a bit depressed. I had hoped that once I earned tenure and cut back on my service commitments I would have time to work more intensely on my scholarship. But which scholarship? I had so many ideas, few of which related—where should I start? I had articles I'd been working on for years but that had never gone anywhere—should I just abandon them? What did I want the next three, five, ten, twenty years of my career to look like? I had planned and planned for tenure; I had built a rock-solid case. But I had no plans for my post-tenure life.

Alright, enough whining. I imagine you're getting sick of me, particularly if you have yet to land a tenure-track job, or are toiling away at a job you hate, or are on one of those horrible tenure-track merry-go-rounds and you can't even begin to guess if you'll get tenure. When the bottom fell out of the economy, the academy was hit hard. The chances of a newly-minted Ph.D. landing a tenure-track job this year have plummeted, and it doesn't look like things are going to pick up any time soon. I'm lucky, I know. I have tenure at a college I love. I truly enjoy my work, my colleagues, my students. I should shut the hell up and count my blessings. Still, I can't help but think I went awry somewhere.

As a whole, I think our profession hyper-focuses on short-term goals like tenure and loses sight of the fact that many of us will be professors for a very long time. In her 2008 *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece "Right on Track," Pamela Johnston describes the tenure track as "the equivalent of a six-year-long job interview." Johnston offers advice for tenure-track faculty at small liberal arts colleges, like mine, and I found her advice solid and helpful, but, like many pieces I've read and presentations I've attended, the focus is solely on getting tenure, not what comes after. When I read pieces that do address what happens after tenure, they are usually about failed tenure bids. James Lang spent years writing for the *Chronicle* about his search for a tenure-track job and his experiences on the tenure track; once he earned tenure, he decided to shift his column focus to teaching in higher education. What about our professional life after tenure?

I wish I had stumbled across some advice concerning what to do to prepare for my post-tenure academic existence, or that someone had handed me Donald E. Hall's *The Academic Self: An Owner's Manual* as I was starting my first full-time job in academia. I am facing decades ahead of me now. What will I do with that time? What do I want to accomplish? What legacy do I want to leave behind? Hall advocates thoughtful self-reflection on one's goals and desires, beginning in graduate school. He writes, "I cannot emphasize enough the utility of and invigoration provided by a process of active career planning" (39). I read Hall's book only recently and already his advice is helping me plan for my post-tenure career.

Like many academics, Hall included, I believe that our profession could do a much better job managing the earning of tenure. For one thing, standards should be clear, logical, and entirely transparent. In 2007, the Modern Language Association Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion published 20 common-sense recommendations concerning tenure guidelines in academia, the first one being, "Departments and institutions should practice and promote transparency throughout the tenuring process" ("Report" 11). While many colleges and universities do follow many of the task force's recommendations, there are still widespread problems. Too often, tenure guidelines are vague, along the lines of "excellence in teaching, service, and scholarship." What does that mean? What qualifies as "excellence"? There should be no guesswork; tenure candidates should know from the time they arrive on campus what is expected of them concerning their tenure case. By their third or fourth year, they should be told, honestly, whether their application is moving along smoothly or whether there are problems. If there are problems, candidates should be offered assistance in addressing and fixing those problems. I've heard too many horror stories of year-before-tenure surprises: candidates blindsided by the information that they will most likely not earn tenure. You don't need to be an ethicist to know that such situations are just plain wrong.

Also, without firm guidelines, some tenure-track professors may be tempted to do too much, to go too far above and beyond. And I suspect some institutions prey on this tendency, asking junior faculty members to assume a greater and greater burden, knowing their worry over tenure will override their desire for self-preservation. This can happen even with specific guidelines, as tenure-track faculty members tell themselves, "Well, if membership on one committee is required, than being on three will be even better for my application!" This is not a healthy situation and can lead to post-tenure burnout. For years I've heard stories of faculty members whose performance grinds to a halt after earning tenure; these stories are mostly framed as complaining about these lazy, do-nothing colleagues who make more work for everyone else. Is this laziness, though, or is it exhaustion after six years of being worked like a mid-18th-century plow horse? I do get annoyed by colleagues who refuse to do their fair share but is reverting to the "accepted" workload post-tenure really laziness?

Senior department members should make every effort to rein in junior faculty members who are heading for burnout, the same way they should snap the whip at faculty who aren't doing their part. Though exploiting junior faculty members is a time-honored tradition in the academy, it is one that needs to be abandoned—for everyone's sake. Junior faculty members should also be encouraged to always think of their career in both the short term and the long term, and this emphasis should begin in graduate school. Several of my graduate school mentors and peers were horrified when I turned down a tenure-track position to accept a three-year appointment, but I was sure it was the right move for me. At that time, I was more concerned with being happy than earning tenure. Once I was on the tenure track, however, I became more concerned with earning tenure than being happy. I could have had both, had I been willing to sit down and ask myself some hard questions. The truth is, what is most important to me is having a career I enjoy. I do my best work when I'm happy, so why can't happiness be the centerpiece of my long-term career goals?

Other junior faculty members may have different desires, and they should be encouraged to integrate those desires into their pre- and post-tenure plans, and this emphasis should begin in their doctoral programs. Had I started my life on the tenure track thinking of my career in terms of decades rather than a series of hoops I needed to jump through, I probably would have made some different choices. Instead of jumping on whatever opportunities came my way in

near-desperation, constantly thinking of "building my case for tenure," I should have examined each opportunity carefully. I should have prioritized more. I should have been thinking short-term *and* long-term. One is not exclusive of the other. Even in the decidedly strange world of academia, it is possible to do short-term and long-term planning simultaneously.

Had I taken more time with my career planning and been more critical of my choices as I made them, I might not be experiencing this post-tenure malaise. Since I would now have a plan to follow, I wouldn't feel so unmoored. Planning for tenure is great; in fact, it's necessary, but our tenure plans should fit into our overall career plans. We should think about all three major aspects of academic life—teaching, scholarship, and service—and plan for each, as parts and together. I didn't need to pursue research as much as I did in my pre-tenure years, as it wasn't a requirement, but I wanted to keep an active research agenda because I felt scholarship was important to me. However, since I had no plan, I let important work lapse and didn't pursue work I should have, and now I have to rebuild my research agenda from scratch. I engaged in far more service than I needed to, and now that I'm tenured, I have to think long and hard about how I can best serve the college without overburdening myself and losing track of my scholarship once again.

The fact is, I knew what I needed to do to get tenure, and I did it. In fact, I did more than I needed to do. But I never stopped to think about what I needed to do to have the long-range career I wanted. But you can damn sure bet I'm thinking about it now. Better late than never.

Works Cited

Hall, Donald E. *The Academic Self: An Owner's Manual*. Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2002.

Johnston, Pamela. "Right on Track." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 14 Nov. 2008. Web. 21 July 2009.

"Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Promotion and Tenure." *Profession* (2007): 9-71.

Kathleen McEvoy is an associate professor of English and Gender & Women's Studies and the coordinator of composition at Washington & Jefferson College, where she teaches composition, professional writing, gender studies, and American and women's literature. She earned her PhD in Rhetoric and Composition from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, with minors in 20th Century American Literature and Gender & Language Studies. She also earned a graduate certificate in Women's Studies from UNCG.



Return to [Table of Contents](#)

[Next: Making Lemonade](#)