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Overcoming Post-Tenure Paralysis



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I've always wondered why people think only fledgling academics need career advice. No doubt grad students and junior professors have it rough, but I work with many midcareer faculty members who feel overworked, overwhelmed, and like their professional years are rapidly passing them by. This post-tenure paralysis often goes unrecognized, and if it continues for too

Of course, name-calling helps no one. And I'd argue that some professors' post-tenure stupor, contrary to popular opinion, is usually just a product of poor planning and nonexistent mentoring, not sloth. The fact is that each time we adopt a new role or transition from one stage to another—from grad student to new professor, from pre-tenure to post-tenure, or from faculty member to administrator—the rules of the game change, and we need to take stock of where we are and plot a path toward where we want to go next.

Yay, I Got Tenure! Now What?

The planning process looks different for post-tenure professors than it does for new faculty, largely because their goals are different. For tenure-track faculty, the aim is to get tenure by meeting a set of externally imposed expectations. But after tenure, faculty have an array of career options to choose from—seeking a promotion to full professor, moving into administration, focusing on teaching—and only their inner motivation to guide them. Left to their own devices, many of them don't know what to do next. So they flounder. Or they get pulled in so many directions that they fail to accomplish anything meaningful.

So if you're feeling stuck, stagnant, or confused after tenure, it may be time to assess your situation and consider the following questions.

“What do I want?”

The first step to getting on track is to define your long-term goals: Where do you want to be professionally in five years? What's your ideal work environment? What does success look like for you at this stage of your career? While these seem like simple questions, it never ceases to surprise me how many professors can't answer them.

Asking these questions may also help overworked professors set some much-needed boundaries. Believe it or not, the biggest threat to midcareer professional success is often too many service commitments. Yes, you have responsibilities to your university, and they've increased since your pre-tenure days. But that doesn't mean you must say “yes” to every request or allow service work to overshadow your scholarship.

Are you listening, ladies? A [recent study](#) on the gender gap in service found that female associate professors spent five hours more per week on service and two hours more per week on mentoring than their male counterparts. I often see women putting the needs of their departments and colleges before their own long-term success, only to feel bitter, angry, and resentful when those same male colleagues are promoted and given institutional rewards for their scholarship.

activities that will lead them to achieve their long-term goals.

“Where am I now?”

Once you know what you want, it's time to take a long, hard look at your day-to-day activities to see whether your behavior is holding you back or moving you forward. Track your time for one week. Jot down on a Post-it note where each 15-minute increment of your day goes. At the end of each day, tally the number of minutes you spent on research, teaching, and service (or whatever your main areas of responsibility are). Then, at the end of the week, create a pie chart of your findings and compare it to the criteria on which you'll be evaluated for your next milestone (whatever that is for you).

When you track your time, you'll quickly see whether you're spending it in ways that align with your future success. If you are, great! If you're not, you need to make some changes.

When I do this exercise with midcareer faculty, it is excruciating. Most of us think we know how we're spending our time, but when faced with hard data on how we are actually spending it, and how far we are from our targets, it can be disturbing. Resist the temptation to blame your situation on external circumstances, like budget cuts. That won't help you right your course. Instead, determine what you can control, adjust accordingly, and let go of the things you can't control.

“How can I get where I want to go?”

Knowing what you want and where you are today exposes the gap between the two. The next step is to determine how to bridge it. If your goal is to be promoted to full professor, but you're currently spending no time on research and writing, the primary criteria for promotion, you know what you need to do: Make time for your research and writing. Or if you aspire to become a public intellectual, but don't know where to begin, why not contact scholars who are successful in the public sphere and ask them how to get started? If your heart is set on becoming an administrator, then it's time to figure out the most efficient way to acquire the skills, contacts, and experience you need to move into that role. And if you're dreaming of a life beyond the academy, it's time to map out an exit strategy.

Don't wait to decide which post-tenure path best suits you. Because if you don't know where you're going, how will you get there?



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