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The second year is the make-or-break year for gaining tenure (opinion)

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Across all disciplines, from occupational therapy to history to business administration, the second year on the tenure track matters at my institution and probably matters at yours. A lot. More than the first year, in fact.

Year two on the tenure track is so important at my institution that, for the past several years, I've had a part-time administrative position helping faculty members navigate it. In fact, from running faculty writing groups and tenure and promotion workshops in our Center for Teaching Excellence over the past decade, I've learned year two is a make-or-break year.

Here's why. Year one gets all the attention. Google "new faculty development programs," and hundreds of results show up. Faculty development research shows that first-year faculty are showered with support on both teaching and research fronts. They often are assigned a faculty mentor and have regular contact with support staff. That makes sense, given the resources poured into expensive tenure-track hires. What I've found, however, is that this support doesn't necessarily translate into tenured success.

During the first year, faculty members do take advantage of mentoring programs and learn much from more experienced faculty. But they are also learning new course preps, establishing labs and starting new programs they were hired to launch or resuscitate. Although first-year faculty are advised to continue to focus on research and publication, many necessarily concentrate on getting acclimated to their classes and becoming a citizen of their universities. It takes time to learn how to teach at a new institution.

Universities also tend to downplay the impact of more personal issues, like moving to a new house, getting children settled in a school district or figuring out how to solve a two-body problem when a spouse has another position across the country. It's not to say such faculty members aren't researching and writing for publication during that first year -- many are. But they have not yet established a realistic work pattern in the frazzled and exciting start-up of year one.

That brings us to year two. In contrast to year one, year two might be packaged with support for all pretenure years (see "[Faculty Development for the 21st Century](#) ^[1]" for a typical lifespan of faculty development programs) or not given much attention at all.

Yet year two often reveals who will get tenure and who won't. Before we had a second-year

faculty mentoring program, I prepared faculty to submit dossiers in the sixth year. There was a clear correlation between year-two progress and a successful year-six application.

Successful faculty members do the following in their second year. In the summer before, after a few weeks of well-deserved vacation, they've already retooled their syllabi and made any necessary changes based on student evaluations. They've gotten reacquainted with their research agendas and developed a definite plan for publication. Once year two starts, they've established a regular research and writing routine, developed stronger time-management skills, and started university service that interests them but doesn't take all their time away from teaching or researching effectively. They tend to do well in both the third-year and tenure reviews because they've established good habits in year two.

Unsuccessful faculty members do the opposite. Many stagger out of year one, exhausted and tired from trying to do too much at one time without a clear direction of what to do next. They may start the second year trying to fix previous teaching mistakes and still spend too much time on teaching preparation or unfulfilling service assignments they could not say no to -- thus, getting little to no writing done. By year four, they've started to panic and restart a research agenda. But with little time to publish enough, many don't achieve tenure. As I said earlier, year two is a make-or-break year.

A Multistep Mentoring Program

To help *all* faculty members understand the importance of year two, my institution built a multistep faculty mentoring program several years ago. Recognizing that, in year one, most new faculty need and often want to devote their energies to teaching, they participate in the "teaching partners" aspect of the program where they are encouraged to focus on teaching -- responding to student evaluations and adjusting classroom practices accordingly -- without trying to direct their energies in multiple directions. Teaching partners meet every month.

In year two, the focus shifts to scholarship and university service, with a heavy emphasis on time management. The idea is, with adequate attention given to teaching and the freedom to focus on it during the first year, faculty members won't still be struggling to get the big teaching pieces underway or be overwhelmed. They will still be fine-tuning in year two, but we hope they will have figured out the basics.

As I like to say at the second-year orientation, the "free pass" from last year to concentrate on teaching and getting settled in is over. My colleague who directs the year-one portion of our faculty mentoring program likes to tell everyone that she is "the hug" and I'm "the hammer." In other words, our message in the second year is that it's time to get serious about facets of faculty life beyond teaching.

Let me offer a sample of our second-year buffet. We meet six times a year for one to two hours. In August, I show faculty a chart of what "halfway to tenure" progress typically looks like in the teaching, research and service columns. Faculty members need at least a certain number of publications/presentations to get tenure, so I halve that number on the chart. The same goes for service obligations (X committees, Y advisees). I also show what range of numbers are acceptable scores on teaching evaluations. Faculty are then asked to compare the chart with what they have so far on CVs and map out a 12-month plan for the second year across all three areas.

We fine-tune writing habits and focus on time-management techniques in September and

October. Faculty members are invited to schedule faculty writing groups and study halls (times to write on-site in a quiet library area). We set writing goals, search for calls for papers and submit conference abstracts right there in the meeting.

In January, we review fall teaching evaluations and work to revise syllabi and course assignments before the start of the semester to cut down on inefficiencies with course preparation and grading. We carefully comb through syllabi, looking for readings that can be trimmed or cutting one of two assignments when both meet the same objective. We also look at ways to use course evaluation feedback to improve assignments and course structure.

In February, faculty members are introduced to which committees are good starting spots for new faculty and which should be saved until after tenure. Just in time for spring advising, we also discuss how to manage advising time efficiently when faculty members at our university, like many other private institutions, meet individually with students to schedule classes each semester.

In March, second-year faculty members get a first look at our online dossier template for a midtenure/third-year review submission before the summer. We review what documents they already have that can go into the dossier (teaching observations as evidence of effective teaching, first publications and so on) and take stock of what evidence they still need to gather within the next year for the third-year review.

At the close of year two, participants have useful overview of how all the pieces of faculty life fit together: the teaching evaluations, the publications, the committee service, the recommendation letters describing all of those elements. Getting the big-picture look at the dossier template early on often clarifies a plan for the third year and beyond and solidifies a clear path for faculty members working through the second half of their tenure-track years.

In an [article](#) ^[2] titled “After the Freshman Bubble Pops,” Laurie A. Schreiner, professor of higher education and organizational leadership at Azusa Pacific University, describes why so many sophomores drop out of college in the second year, noting “It’s a gradual weaning process ... all of a sudden the gloves come off, and this is real college.” The article goes on to describe why more universities have begun to develop student development programs exclusively for sophomores. Second-year faculty need mentoring programs to avoid a similar “sophomore slump.”

Author Bio:

Christine Tulley is the academic career development coordinator and a professor of English at the University of Findlay. She is also the author of How Writing Faculty Write (Utah State University Press, 2018), a study of faculty productivity habits.

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Links:

[1] <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2009/5/faculty-development-for-the-21st-century>

[2] <https://www.chronicle.com/article/After-the-Freshman-Bubble-Pops/4556>