Feature Article:

Advice for the Newly-Tenured

Dear Kerry Ann,

I was recently awarded tenure and promoted to associate professor! It has been a long, hard road, so I feel excited, relieved and grateful. I’m having a big party to celebrate the accomplishment and to thank everyone who has supported me along the way.

But I’m also feeling confused and a bit nervous. When I look around at my colleagues who are associate professors, they are a pretty miserable bunch. They seem frazzled, humorless, unhealthy and minimally research active, and many appear to be completely burned out. I’m not sure how to ask this without sounding rude, but how can I avoid turning into a bitter and overworked associate professor? Do newly tenured faculty members make certain common mistakes that bring on this misery? Can I do anything now -- while I’m still excited and hopeful -- that can change my experience?

Sincerely,

Newly Tenured

Dear Newly Tenured,

I’m delighted to hear about your new status! It really is a delicious moment, isn’t it? You are officially tenured, you have lifetime employment, and you’re standing on the cusp of a new chapter in your career. I’m savoring the mere thought of it!

Whenever you are at the beginning of a transition period, it’s smart to pause. In addition to celebrating your accomplishment, I love that you are also taking a look at your colleagues, considering why they seem so unhappy and looking for strategies to avoid that unhappiness in your own career. Associate professors in your department are not alone in their dissatisfaction; it’s a national trend, and it’s certainly something that I see regularly with the faculty members who register for the NCFDD's Post-tenure Pathways program.
I would love to share with you the three biggest mistakes that I observe newly tenured faculty members make. If you know what those mistakes are, then you are not only far less likely to make them, but you also have the opportunity to experiment with new ways of thinking and working that will help you to truly enjoy your tenured status.

**Mistake #1: You act as if nothing has changed when everything has changed.** The primary mistake that newly tenured faculty make is that they continue working as if they are still racing against a ticking tenure clock. The fear of not winning tenure led them to work long hours and to neglect their health, relationships and leisure. And then when they win tenure, they keep working as if nothing has changed. Continuing to act as if work is their life -- instead of their job -- often results in imbalance, illness and misery.

You can avoid this mistake by treating the remainder of the summer as your transition time. In other words, I encourage you to dedicate time over the next few weeks to making a conscious and intentional transition in your identity, work and personal life from junior to senior faculty member.

One way to do that transitional work is to take stock of your life in its entirety. By that, I mean looking across the various domains of your life and asking yourself -- without judgment or shame -- how you would rate your satisfaction with various aspects of your personal life and what might be missing. Things to consider might include your:

- Physical health
- Finances
- Home and lifestyle
- Emotional well-being
- Romantic relationship(s)
- Friendship network
- Family relationships
- Hobbies and leisure
- Non-work-related creative expression

After you’ve assessed your personal life, you can focus on taking stock of your work life. Consider what aspects of your professional life you are satisfied with and what aspects you want to change. For example, try asking yourself:

- Do I feel supported on campus?
- Do I have the mentoring network I need?
• Do I have the resources (internal or external) to support the type of research I want to do moving forward?
• Do I want to change the pace of my work?
• Do I want to change the depth or breadth of my work?
• Do I want to change my research trajectory?
• Do I need to have any clearing conversations with colleagues?
• Do I have colleagues that I need to forgive (and/or do I need to do some personal healing work) in order to start with a clean slate this fall?

Using the remaining weeks of the summer to complete both a personal and professional inventory means that you’ll be ready to start the fall semester prepared to tackle any challenges that may come with your new status. Taking the time to properly transition now will save you time, effort and unnecessary stress as you move forward in your career.

**Mistake #2: You don’t know who you are or what you want.** Before you earned tenure, you had to work hard to meet externally imposed expectations for your research, teaching and service. The greatest gift (and challenge) of winning tenure is that now you get to choose your post-tenure pathway. What will your direction be for the next five to seven years? Do you want to be a public intellectual, a master teacher, an institutional change agent, a disciplinary superstar, an administrator or something else entirely?

Clearly, there are both differential consequences and rewards for whichever path you choose, but the key is that it’s your responsibility to identify what you want and then move in that direction. The mistake I see newly tenured faculty repeatedly make is that they have spent so long pleasing others that they no longer know who they are, much less what they want.

In order to determine what your next steps will be, I encourage you to take some time during this transitional summer to consider the following simple -- but important -- questions:

- Who am I? (Not as a professor at ________ University, but as a human being with a limited engagement on planet Earth)
- What is my zone of genius? In other words, what am I distinctly and perfectly designed to do? How can I start spending as much of my workday as possible doing activities in that zone?
- What do I want my whole life to look like five years from now?

Asking these questions will help you to start making the seismic internal shift from being a person whose life has been shaped by a tenure-track job to a person who intentionally designs their life from a place of deep self-knowledge. This process will also help you to state your five-year goals and create a plan to meet those goals.
Mistake #3: Your ambivalence leaves you a player in other people’s games. When newly tenured faculty members show up in the fall with no agenda of their own, they have no filter for assessing incoming requests, and they’re left reacting to request upon request without any sense for when to say yes or no. They’re so used to pleasing others that they feel flattered to be asked to do invisible, labor-intensive and unrewarded work that doesn’t move them in any particular direction (but often advances other people’s agendas). They quickly find themselves spreading their energy in so many different directions that they end up working longer and harder than they did during their pre-tenure years. Then one day they wake up and several years have slipped by, and despite all of their hard work, they can’t point to any one area of notable individual accomplishment. Instead, they’ve helped a whole bunch of other people realize their goals. This is how and why many tenured professors become bitter, angry and resentful.

When you have a clear post-tenure pathway, you are prepared to approach these requests very differently. You create opportunities instead of reactively accepting responsibilities. You pass every request through a simple filter, asking yourself: Will this move me in the direction of my five-year goals? If yes, the answer is "yes", and if not, the answer is "no". And instead of relying on your pre-tenure mentoring networks, you actively construct a new mentoring network that will support your five-year goals and help you to develop the specific skills and experience you need to get there.

If you make an intentional transition -- where you allow yourself to reflect on who you are, what path you want to take moving forward and how you will create the support systems to ensure you don’t fall into the common mid-career traps -- then you will change the course of your career (and your life) in a powerful new direction.

Peace and productivity,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, PhD

President, National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity