Panel on Tenure: April 18, 2012

Comments from Rick Harrison

Who am I?? I am a biologist (faculty member in E&EB, which is a Department in two Colleges), a former Department Chair, former member of FACTA, member of several appeals committees (faculty appealing the denial of tenure). Below, I provide my personal views (perhaps not shared by all) on issues related to being an untenured faculty member and getting tenure.

Most important, know how the tenure process works! Do not regard the tenure process simply as a mundane and bureaucratic distraction, not worthy of your attention.

The Assistant Professor as Department member:

(1) Understand your Department “culture” (relationships among faculty, power structure, how decisions are made). Be aware of how your discipline fits within the larger intellectual context of the Department (e.g., are you central or peripheral?). Be aware of how local resources are allocated and speak up if you feel that you do not have the resources that you need or that you were promised. Make sure that you express your concerns in writing.

(2) Be visible, participate, interact. Do NOT be reclusive (do not hide away and focus entirely on your own research).

(3) Ask questions of your colleagues. Be sure that you are getting good advice. You should have a mentor, but do not rely on a single colleague for getting advice.

(4) Take advantage of yearly meetings with your Chair, and especially your 3-year review, to get honest feedback. Pay attention to what is suggested and, even if you disagree, consider carefully what your colleagues are saying and try to follow their advice.

(5) If necessary or appropriate, adopt a bet-hedging strategy with respect to your research. Do not simply invest in a single, risky major project (e.g., one that might have a particularly important outcome but for which arriving at that outcome is problematic). In my discipline, don’t just aim for a paper in *Science* or *Nature*, but demonstrate a consistent and continuous output of papers in high quality journals. It is not a good strategy to depend on a major pulse of late-breaking papers just before being considered for tenure. (Not sure how this plays out with respect to disciplines in which the major research products are books.)
(6) Research outcomes are certainly the most important component of the tenure decision, but do not ignore the other components. On the other hand, do not rely solely on teaching excellence to get you tenured. With that in mind, allocate your time appropriately (teaching can easily take up all of your time).

The larger context:

(7) Look beyond the Department – interact with colleagues in other Departments and Colleges. Letters will be solicited from Cornell faculty not in your Department.

(8) Outside letters are very important in evaluating your research contributions. Do what is necessary within your discipline to be visible to colleagues at other Universities. Attend meetings, get invited to give seminars, etc.

(9) Finally, do not believe that there is a unique prescription for getting tenure – there is not a certain number of papers, a book published by a particular University Press. The decision is not so formulaic.