

From the issue dated July 30, 2004

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v50/i47/47c00301.htm>**FIRST PERSON****Collegiality Lessons****The one skill that her mentors in graduate school failed to teach her was how to schmooze**

By PAT PHELPS

Last semester, midway through my third year as an assistant professor, it was time for my preliminary tenure review.

That process brings with it all the angst that we think we've left behind once the dissertation has been defended, only to discover that the job market looms large on the horizon. A lucky few of us find ourselves securely on the tenure track. And then we discover a promotion-and-tenure committee waiting for us, baring its collective teeth, all too eager, it seems, for fresh meat.

Well, maybe not. Those drafted into service on such committees have the arduous job of reviewing hefty files and making crucial decisions: Are these junior faculty members the sort of people we want to keep around for the duration?

Although I haven't yet been part of a tenure committee, I do not imagine it to be an easy or enviable task. The most difficult part may be setting aside the voluminous tenure file and identifying the numerous "intangibles" that begin to surface -- the criteria that have nothing to do with teaching, research, or service; things that are more felt than known; things that can hardly be defined, much less discussed.

My official letter of preliminary review illustrated the difference between the tenure criteria that we all understand and those that are more intuitive. "Your teaching reviews from both students and colleagues are excellent," the letter stated, "and we are impressed that in spite of your many responsibilities on campus, you still manage to be a publishing scholar." Other colleagues had told me that publishing was a relatively minor consideration, because of the heavy teaching load at my institution, so I was pleased to see the committee make note of my publication record.

About committee work, the letter said: "We know such work is sometimes as thankless as it is time-consuming, but we want you to know it is noticed and appreciated." I was glad to see the panel mention that in my evaluation. That my colleagues were cognizant of the invisible work load that some faculty members shoulder, while others simply do not, made the memory of those many committee meetings less irksome.

At least, until I reached the next item in my review.

"Some committee members note that you simply do not spend enough 'quality time' on campus. In order to build the friendly relationships with other faculty members that will ensure your progress, we encourage you to become more visible and spend more time with your colleagues."

I'll admit, I was stunned. I'm the sort of person who receives comments on my student evaluations like, "I don't think I've ever seen Dr. Phelps in a bad mood." Another student (a very succinct and insightful one, I might add) writes, "Professor P. rocks!"

Most faculty members can tell you some version of the same basic story: The Colleague Who Should Not Be Getting Tenure, but Still Is. I know of a guy who refuses to teach his department's freshman-level offerings because, as he puts it, "I was not hired to be a baby sitter." There's the woman who commutes 120 miles to the campus two days a week and will not attend committee meetings or other functions that are not scheduled on those two days. And then, my personal favorite: The guy who gives his colleagues the cold shoulder -- literally, he turns his back if they dare to disagree with him, no matter how congenially.

Still, somehow, he received tenure this year. And I'll admit that I felt relieved when I heard that. Surely, I thought, there was hope for me, the perpetually upbeat and accommodating professor.

But perhaps I should have expected the criticism in my review after all. I'm the product of working-class parents from the Midwest, which means I show up for class on time, every time, prepared to do my best. I expect the same from my students, but my demands are good natured and generally meet with little resistance. I approach committee meetings in the same way: I show up, and I make an honest effort to do what I can, no matter how trivial the task may seem.

The thing I don't do well, admittedly, is schmooze. At the small Southern university where I'm now a faculty member, schmoozable moments are in great supply: We have regular Friday- afternoon faculty gatherings, weekly faculty lunches, and less frequent faculty-development workshops. It's probably no surprise to learn that I always attend the workshops but rarely the social gatherings.

I asked the committee for clarification on the real issues at stake here. Should I just spend more time on the campus? Supply the faculty lounge with baked goods? The only response my reviewers could give me was that I needed to be "more available."

Senior colleagues have offered suggestions like "Just hang out in the hall more often. You know, chew the fat."

That sounds easy enough, but it runs counter to my instincts, which tell me I should be working when I'm on the campus and saving the talking for when I'm at home.

Perhaps I should blame the fact that I attended only large state universities before becoming a faculty member at a small undergraduate college. Professors at research institutions, it seems, are a completely different breed. They don't always like their colleagues, and that's perfectly all right, because they don't have to see them very often. They certainly don't have to shoot the breeze with them. In fact, doing so would probably be seen as a character flaw rather than an asset: "When does he have time to do his research when he spends so much time talking?"

But as quickly as I make that comparison, I have to remind myself that I have chosen to work at a small university precisely because I love spending time with my students -- talking about books and assignments, yes, but also talking about their lives.

I could blame my family circumstances. I have two small children and a spouse at home. But many of my colleagues have small children and spouses as well, and they travel en masse to our faculty social gatherings, which are often family friendly.

No, the simple truth of the matter is that in training for my present job, I neglected to learn a crucial skill. And my mentors along the way -- who taught me how to formulate a research question, how to approach the research process, and how to submit my work for publication -- neglected to mention that the ability to make small talk was another skill I would need.

Over the many years I spent preparing for this career, I can't remember a single conversation devoted to collegiality.

Then again, I'm not sure you can learn to schmooze. Many of the academics I count among my friends confess that chewing the fat doesn't come naturally to them, either.

But I'm going to make the effort.

Because I do want tenure. Better start chewing.

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Section: Chronicle Careers
Volume 50, Issue 47, Page C3

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