

## **The Tenure Process for Engineering Faculty at Columbia: Myth vs. Reality**

### **Myth: The tenure process doesn't begin until the 7<sup>th</sup> year.**

Reality: The process should begin before the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> year—your chair has to start gathering materials and contacting external letter writers in the spring, so that they have the summer to respond. It's important to talk with your Chair and get the process started early, especially if you have an appointment in more than one department.

### **Myth: If you go up early, your case will take longer.**

Reality: In fact the opposite is true. The most common reason to go up early is because of a counteroffer from another institution. If you are interested in going up early, you should talk with your Chair and others in your department.

### **Myth: To get tenure you have to have high levels of research productivity, service, and teaching.**

Reality: All three are important, but research matters the most. There is no mention of teaching or service in the letter that goes to your referees. A national study (Steinpreis et al., 1999) of the tenure process found that the number of publications was the most important factor in tenure reviews, followed by journal quality, grants, the type of research area, and teaching. People don't get tenure because of their teaching, but a bad teaching record can be used against you if your case is questionable. Teaching evaluations do not have to be excellent, but they should not be below average. It is best to contribute strongly and strategically to a few community and scholarly committees, rather than dispersing yourself over many.

### **Myth: You have to be the best in your field to get tenure at Columbia.**

Reality: You don't have to be at the top of your field when you go up for tenure, but you should be able to demonstrate the potential to be at the top sometime in the near future.

### **Myth: Your referee list will be constructed without your input.**

Reality: While you are not supposed to construct your own reference list for your tenure dossier, you should consult with your Chair. Make sure he or she is aware of potential conflicts or personal issues you may have with any of the eminent people in your field. Your department will develop a list of 15 references to include with your dossier, as well as a list of scholars comparable to yourself.

- Most of your referees should be nationally known in their field or have a recognized position (i.e., department chairs, members of the NAS or NAE, etc.), and be located at a peer institution.
- Your list should include no more than a few people from industry and from institutions outside of the U.S.
- There generally should be no more than two people from your PhD-granting institution (although it is not uncommon for the list to include a thesis advisor).
- Your referees do not have to be from the same field. If your research is interdisciplinary, your referees should come from the fields that you impact.

The Dean and the Vice Dean will vet the list of references. If there are not enough names from well-known peer institutions, they will send the list back to the Chair.

### **Myth: One bad letter will kill your tenure case.**

Reality: All of your letters do not have to be glowing. One bad letter rarely sinks a tenure case. Longer letters tend to be more persuasive than short letters (Trix and Psenka, 2005), so it is important that your letter writers know your research well, and it is better if they actually know you as an individual.