

Early Career Members

Your Productive Journey to Successful Retention

Editor's note: The guest author for this article is Dr. Olga S. Walsh, who since 2010, has been an assistant professor of soil nutrient management, Montana State University, Department of Research Centers, Western Triangle Agricultural Research Center, Conrad, MT. Her research focus is on precision nutrient management and remote sensing. She earned her Ph.D. from Oklahoma State University in soil science in 2009.

As I am writing this, I am simultaneously working on finalizing my substantial retention dossier. I do not claim to be an expert on the policies and procedures to the extent of the seasoned faculty members who, after all, have the experience of not only preparing their own dossier, but also reviewing the dossiers of others while serving on committees. In this article, I simply would like to share my experience from the perspective of a retention candidate. I hope that my advice will make the retention process more productive and less stressful for others in the early years of their career.

As newly appointed faculty begin to fulfill the responsibilities that our letter of appointment charges us with, we must prioritize our time and resources on a daily basis. Since we are dealing with a myriad of various tasks while meeting tight deadlines, we sometimes put the process of assembling a comprehensive dossier on hold. After all, the deadline for submitting the retention dossier is two years away.

The title of this article emphasizes my key advice to anyone in the early stages of their career. Retention is not a deadline—not just a collection of carefully put together documents. I encourage you to think of retention as a journey. And the more productive you are throughout this journey, the better chance you will have to be successfully retained. Most newly appointed faculty have a plan of action—the direction in which they would like to take their professional activities. From the point of view of having a productive journey to retention, the faculty must ensure that their professional activities fulfill the responsibilities specified in their letter of appointment while meeting and/or exceeding the criteria detailed in their Role, Scope, Criteria, Standards, and Procedures document.

I've Just Been Hired. Now What?

When you are hired, the first and foremost tasks you must perform are to read, re-read, and then read again your letter of appointment and your Role, Scope, Criteria, Standards, and Procedures document. Once you are absolutely clear of your specific responsibilities and review



Olga S. Walsh

Assistant Professor, Soil Nutrient Management, Montana State University, Department of Research Centers, Western Triangle Agricultural Research Center, Conrad, MT

criteria, you will be able to draft a strategic plan of your activities that will enable you to show evidence of effectiveness and/or excellence, which is required for successful retention. I advise you to stay very focused on the specific distribution of responsi-

bilities. It is not always easy, though absolutely necessary, to keep a good balance among the types of your activities according to your appointment. Keep in mind that your position description has been written to address the needs of your university, college, department, and prospective clientele. This seems like a needless statement, but it is very easy to get overwhelmed or distracted. So, if you come by a particular project that you are excited to be a part of, you need to make sure that the amount of effort and time it requires will not compromise your primary objectives.

The second step I would recommend that you take immediately upon being hired is to identify an experienced faculty in your department as your mentor. Most senior faculty members are more than happy to share their experiences and wisdom with new colleagues. If there are other faculty in your department that are going through the retention process, joining forces will create a mutually beneficial partnership.

Most institutions offer regular information sessions or seminars for tenure-track faculty dedicated to the retention, promotion, and tenure process. I highly recommend that you attend these sessions every time they are offered. You might find that the basic information covered will be repeated, but the policies and guidelines could be changing over time, and you need to be aware of these changes. Additionally, these sessions offer face-to-face interaction, and the question-and-answer

portion of the seminars often leads to the discussion of topics that otherwise are not being covered but are important. Some departments have a copy of a generic example of the retention dossier available to newly appointed faculty upon request.

Build Your Dossier

The information sessions and your role and scope documents will guide you to clearly identify the major elements that your dossier must contain along with the required submission format. Now, as you complete your groundwork, you should have a clear vision of what your ideal dossier should be like and be ready to begin building it. Depending on your department and your appointment, most dossiers will have sections such as Research, Teaching, Service, and Professional Development. Please remember to keep originals of

your letter of appointment, annual evaluations, and other important documents; these will have to be submitted as a part of your dossier. You will also have to include your CV and a Personal Statement. It's a good idea to update your CV regularly (for example, on a monthly basis), routinely keep track of your professional activities, and add them to your CV. The same advice goes for the materials you potentially would like to include in your dossier, such as professional correspondence, letters of appreciation, and materials related to service.

The Personal Statement is a vital constituent of your dossier. It should state what specific goals you have set for yourself that reflect the mission of your institution, college,

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and the department and explain what activities you have performed to achieve these goals. The Personal Statement should be written in a way that it is easily understood by individuals who are not familiar with your area of expertise. Remember that your dossier will go through several review committees from your department, your college, and the university committee. To clearly illustrate your effectiveness, you will carefully select several pieces of evidence, which may be your annual evaluation letters or teaching evaluations and thank you letters from conference organizers recognizing your participation. It is wise to include four to six evidence pieces for each portion as well as an index of all of the submitted materials. Some dossiers will have an appendix, where you can list all of the documents that are not attached to your dossier but that are available upon request. Keep copies of all of the documents and evidence submitted as a part of your dossier so that they can be utilized in your future reviews.

Make sure the documents are proofread to eliminate errors. I also encourage you to request that several colleagues and friends read through your dossier to catch any errors and to give you feedback on how to streamline your documents.

In conclusion, to make sure that your journey to successful retention is productive, start early, focus on your responsibilities detailed in your letter of appointment, build a support network, identify your goal (your best-case scenario) dossier, tailor your professional activities towards that goal, document your activities with pieces of evidence, and last, but not least, follow the deadlines for submission. I wish you all the most productive journey and a very successful retention and promotion and tenure!