

Welcome to Column 11 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website <http://newmedia.colorado.edu/~socwomen/about/career.html>

May 22, 2006

HEY JANE!

"I have been denied tenure at my institution, what do I do now?"

JANE SAYS:

First, you should know that you are in good company – some very talented and famous sociologists have been denied tenure. There is definitely life after tenure denial and many people, after an initial period of grief and/or anger, end up happier in their new occupational home (be it academic or outside of academia).

Once you are denied tenure, you basically have three options.

OPTION 1: APPEAL THE DECISION.

The first question to ask yourself (and others) is do you have a basis for an appeal? If you aren't sure, talk to the SWS discrimination committee. They will be able to help you assess your situation. It is also okay to consult with a lawyer prior to or without ever taking legal action. If you were denied tenure at the departmental level, an appeal would be very difficult and tricky. You have to consider if your appeal were successful, would you want to stay in a department that had denied you tenure. If you had support at the departmental level and denial at the college (or higher) level, an appeal may be more feasible. Of course, as with all the advice in this column, this will vary quite a bit from place to place. The local context on your campus may be a major factor in whether or not an appeal would be successful. Have there been a couple of unfair decisions in a row? Are people already outraged about past decisions and ready to rally around your case?

Many people who have been denied tenure say they never even considered appealing because they wouldn't have stayed somewhere they were not wanted. Often people who do appeal have colleagues (and students) who step up to champion their cause. Keep in mind that even a successful appeal could have its own repercussions. You may be seen as a hero to some people on your campus (or in the profession) and demonized by others. This attention is likely to fade over time. You may also experience long lasting personal resentment, anger, or fear of going up for promotion to full professor at this institution. Recognize that these feelings are normal, talk to peers and mentors about what you're experiencing and let them support and encourage you.

OPTION 2: FIND ANOTHER ACADEMIC JOB.

Be very honest with yourself – were you denied because your record didn't warrant tenure based on the guidelines (however vague) of your current institution or is it likely that the decision was influenced by structural or political factors. Unfair decisions happen, but if you are using this as an excuse to soothe your ego, you will make your job search difficult. Your honest assessment of your record will help you to know where to aim your job search. If your publication record was weak, it's probably not a good idea to apply to research institutions. On the other hand, if your teaching record was your downfall, liberal arts institutions are probably not your best bet. Contrary to the messages many of us receive in our graduate training that Research I institutions are the most desirable places to work, there are in fact multiple avenues within academia that offer exciting, challenging and rewarding work.

Keep in mind that there can be vast differences in what any given department requires for tenure. Some "teaching" departments actually require quite a few publications for example. Some "research" departments expect articles and some expect a book. If you were denied tenure at a "research" university, this does not mean that you would not be welcome at another research university. Your best bet is to talk to colleagues in other departments or through your SWS networks and ask how your record would stand up in their department. This can give you an idea of where (what tier and what type of department) to focus your job search.

Use organizations such as SWS to find support. Although you will not know who your external reviewers were, they may hear about the outcome of your case and offer to write letters of recommendation for you. If at all possible, you will also want to be sure to find someone from the department where you were denied tenure to write a letter of recommendation for you. They will be best suited to give context to your tenure denial. Many people would suggest letting your letters of recommendation rather than your own application letter explain your situation. A few people would argue that depending on your situation, you may feel it is appropriate for you to address the situation in your own cover letter. If your case was truly unfair you may be tempted to rail against the institution that denied you tenure. People have done that and survived, but it is typically not a good idea to talk badly about an institution or about colleagues. If your case was truly unjust, then your record probably speaks for itself. And if your institution or department is truly malevolent, their reputation will likely precede them.

Keep in mind that some institutions allow you to stay on for a year while others expect you to leave right away. Use your time wisely. If you remain in your department the year following tenure denial, although it may be very difficult, continue to be collegial, serve on committees if possible, and keep writing. You want to be as marketable as possible and there may be people at your institution who are willing to go the extra mile to support you in your job search. If you fall completely off the radar, it will be harder to connect with those people.

OPTION 3: FIND ANOTHER JOB OUTSIDE OF ACADEMIA.

This is a great time to ask yourself what you *really* want to do with your life. When was the last time you seriously considered this? Graduate school has a way of steering us into

a very narrowly focused track. Academia also has a way of limiting our geographic mobility. Is there someplace you've always wanted to live or do you have a place to which you've wanted to return? Now's the time to do it. You are unlikely to find too many other jobs that enjoy the flexible schedules of academia; on the other hand, you are very likely to find work that is more highly compensated.

Because graduate school often trains us to have a very narrow research and substantive focus, this route may take some creative thinking and networking. Once again, I urge you to utilize the resources SWS and other professional organizations have to offer. Talk to applied sociologists and find out what kinds of jobs are available to you. Also, recall people you went to graduate school with who did not travel an academic path, get in touch with them. You may have former students working in various fields who would make great contacts.

Do you enjoy crunching numbers? There are tons of nonacademic survey research and market research corporations. Do you enjoy reviewing manuscripts? Think about the publishing field (you probably have lots of contacts there). Do you have experience organizing conferences? Think about event planning (imagine what you can do with a real budget). Is teaching your passion? Almost every company and nonprofit organization needs trainers or education directors. Have you been successful obtaining grants? Maybe you'd like to work for the organization that has provided those grants. If you enjoy the university environment, consider an administrative position in an office of institutional research, an admissions, personnel, or new student orientation office or directing a women's or multicultural center. If love to write, become a writer – imagine how freeing it would be to be able to write without the constraints of disciplinary rules and jargon and how fulfilling it could be to have your ideas presented to a mass audience. Open a bookstore, join the circus, go to law school, run for public office, make a documentary, start a landscaping business . . . the possibilities are (almost) endless.

SOME OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER:

Mourn, grieve, be angry, punch a pillow, eat a gallon of chocolate ice cream, talk to a counselor, go skydiving, sleep in for a week, burn all the tee-shirts you've acquired from your institution (I advise doing this at home rather than at your office), take a trip to Tahiti. . . do whatever you need to do to take care of your own physical and mental health during this time. Then, pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get to work. This will be a very busy time, deciding whether to appeal, identifying allies and supporters, applying for jobs, creating a non-academic resume, all the while continuing your regular teaching, research, and possibly service duties.

I strongly recommend attending the SWS winter meeting to be surrounded by really awesome people who will want to comfort, encourage and support you.

You may find that people want to hear your story. Their motivation may be care and concern for you or fear of finding themselves in the same situation. It's up to you to decide how to handle this. Some people find it empowering to be able to talk about it and to help others through similar situations. If you prefer to maintain your privacy, you may

want to think through how you will respond to questions and may even develop a script for this so you aren't caught off guard when you run into a curious colleague.

At the risk of sounding like a self-help guru, look for the silver-lining. When reflecting back on tenure denial, many people say that although it felt like the end of the world at the time, it turned out to be the best thing that ever happened, that the institution did them a favor, and that they are much happier in their current position than they were before!

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution. And consult with your professional mentors to determine what is most appropriate in your specific situation.

I hope this helps! Stay tuned next month for Question 12: "I am on the job market and I am pregnant. Do you have any advice for me?"

-- Jane

Do you have a question for Jane? E-mail it to lara-foley@utulsa.edu.