

Postdoc Academic Chat #5

Readings

Academic Non-Tenure Opportunities After Your Postdoc

Friday, February 10, 2012
Li Ka Shing (LKSC) Room 101

Questions/Discussion Items to Consider

1. What circumstances could you imagine that would lead you to accept a non-tenure track offer over a tenure-track offer?
2. Which situation (the two body problem, running out of money, sticking around, or the best option), if any, from article #2 applies to you and what does this say about the preparation you should do before completing your postdocs?
3. Which, if any, of your recent postdoc colleagues have accepted non-tenure track positions and what was the reaction within your research group to such a decision?

Readings

#1 Significant Growth of Non-Tenure Track Positions

#2 Variations on the Theme of Academic Careers: The Non-tenure Track Position

#3 Negotiating the Non-Tenure Track

#1 Significant Growth of Non-Tenure Track Positions*

**Taken from the draft of material to be published in early 2012 in the second edition of Tomorrow's Professor: Preparing for Academic Careers in Science and Engineering. – Richard Reis*

The *sine qua non* of academic careers for over a hundred years has been the tenure track position leading in about six years to tenure and promotion from assistant to associate professor and then to life-time employment at a particular institution. Tenured faculty serve on academic councils and other governing committees and are the pool from which department chairs, deans, provosts, and presidents are drawn.

By having a system that encourages longevity, which tenure clearly does, the institution benefits from the reduced costs associated with not having formal annual reviews (as found in industry) and in having senior people available for administrative, governance, and mentoring responsibilities. Additional financial advantages of tenure for the institution become clear when we remember that tenure is a benefit just like health care and vacation time. Tenure, or more accurately the promise of it, is part of the total compensation package that candidates negotiate at the time of employment, and if the university did not provide its faculty with the security of tenure, it would probably have to compensate them with a higher salary.

It is also the case that in these difficult budgetary times employees everywhere become more risk averse and show a greater willingness to accept excessive or inappropriate demands from management. This is true in higher education as well, making tenure protection all the more important.

For these and other reasons, tenure is not going away. However, the number of new tenure track positions at all higher education institutions across the United States is decreasing significantly. In 1975, almost 57 percent of faculty were tenured or on the tenure track, yet today that percentage has been almost cut in half, and the percentage of new non-tenure track faculty has gone from 43.2 percent to 68.8 percent. [10, 11] Note that phrases such as fixed-term, limited-term, contract, and contingent, are often used in place of "non-tenure track," but they all mean essentially the same thing.

The main reason for the increase in non-tenure track positions is the budget constraints referred to above. In spite of the financial advantages to the institutions of having at least some tenured faculty, when it comes to adding new faculty, having a significant number enter off the tenure track can result in significant savings to the college or university. New non-tenure track faculty, as opposed to those already in the system, are often significantly less expensive, some averaging about half as much per credit hour of teaching as their tenure track counterparts. [10]

Hiring non-tenure track faculty also gives the institution more flexibility in meeting supply and demand shifts in student interests. Other motives, as noted by Gross, might include "temporarily replacing tenure track faculty on leave, the use of 'adjuncts' who bring special knowledge and experience into the academy, the expanding need for 'remedial' education, and the employment of a partner in a dual career recruitment." [10] Of course there are also negative impacts on the academic culture from having such a large number of non-permanent faculty. These include such things as a loss of community, lack of shared sacrifice, and the difficulty of creating a long term vision. However, in these financial times many institutions are willing to pay this price.

No matter the reasons, the reality is that today there are simply far more graduate students and postdocs seeking tenure track positions than there are such positions and there is every reason to believe that the same situation will continue throughout the coming decade. Some graduate students and postdocs will want to pursue tenure track positions at all costs and they should be encouraged to do so, hopefully using some of the techniques and approaches outlined in this book. Yet, while the benefits of becoming a tenured professor are obvious, they do come at a price, and one that may not be worth the cost for some segments of the graduate student and postdoc population seeking academic positions. Furthermore, there are, believe it or not, some real benefits to not having sought a tenure track position.

What might you gain by not being on the tenure track? One way to answer this question is to consider the other things you could do if you were not worrying about getting tenure, such as spending more time teaching, doing research, speaking out on controversial matters, exploring options at other academic institutions, considering possibilities outside academia for you and your partner, and doing more things with your family and friends.

In particular, non-tenure track options have advantages for graduate students and postdocs who aren't sure if they want an academic career and would like to try it out without the full-time, intense probationary period that the tenure track requires. It also offers those individuals, especially in science and engineering fields, the opportunity to work part-time while continuing with full-time employment in industry or government with the eventual possibility of full-time academic positions.

Stanford University, for example, has a non-tenured faculty category called "teaching professor." One such professor teaches a number of classes ranging from small sophomore seminars to large introductory lectures of up to 500 students in his specialty, environmental sciences. With a reappointment every five years, he has been doing so full-time for the last 20 years.

In another case, also at Stanford, a professor teaches two specialized courses in a field called "smart product design" while also being employed half-time locally at one of the best product design firms in the country. His wife is a full-time tenured professor at Stanford. They would both have liked tenured positions, but finding them at the same institution is difficult for any academic couple. Their willingness not to insist on this path led to an excellent academic and industrial combination for him, and it gave her a full-time career at a prestigious university.

The same situation can also apply to research. In this case, however, it is important that you make sure that your non-tenure track position gives you the authority to serve as a Principal Investigator (PI) which allows you to author proposals, receive external funding, and supervise graduate students and postdocs. Often such appointments come with titles like Research Professor, or Senior Research Scientist. An inorganic chemist I know, after a very successful career in government, went to the University of California,

Los Angeles as a senior research scientist. In such a role she was able to direct research and supervise graduate students without the service and teaching responsibilities associated with tenured faculty members.

It also turns out that tenure can actually limit your freedom of personal choice, particularly if both you and your partner are academics -- something far more common today than just a few years ago. As an associate professor of psychology at the University of Chicago put it to me a few years ago: "My wife and I both just got tenure in our respective departments. We're glad, but now we are really trapped. Now we can't go anywhere!"

Yes, you can always walk away from a tenured position. Yet, after the investment you and your partner put into getting it, that would be very difficult to do and more often than not you would stay where you are. This is particularly true when you realize that even for successfully tenured faculty members the likelihood that as a couple you can leave one institution and both find tenured positions at another one is quite low.

There is also the notion that if you have tenure you are more likely not to do things that will make you more attractive to other academic institutions or to industry. After all, if you can't be fired, why put in the effort to stay at the cutting edge in your field? Most tenured faculty do in fact keep up with their teaching and research, but we all know of several situations where that is not the case. [11]

According to Tower, there are three kinds of Ph.D. and postdoc candidates who prefer non-tenure track jobs. They are: (1) The strategists, those who are willing to trade tenure track for a better location, more prestigious institution, opportunities for spouses and quality of life, (2) The pragmatists, those who need a job now and can't wait for the unlikely possibility of a tenure track job later, and (3) The nonconformists, those who just like the freedom to work at their own pace, to switch employers as needed, and who are simply not impressed with the idea of tenure. Tower goes on to point out that in some cases you can actually negotiate a higher salary - as a trade-off against benefits - than if you were on the tenure track. For still others, a non-tenure track position is a way to prove to themselves - without the clock running - that their qualifications will improve for a tenure track position that may open up at a later date.[12]

The strategies for applying for non-tenure track positions are essentially the same as those outlined in this book for tenure track jobs. The differences are that: (1) if you take such applications seriously the likelihood of being successful goes up considerably over those many others who will treat the effort as a throw-away afterthought, (2) your chances of success increase simply because there are so many more such positions than tenure track positions and, (3) your bargaining position goes up if you have an accompanying spouse being considered for a tenure track position since such couples are greatly sought after by institutions and thus you can be more assertive in raising questions and issues that will be important to you.

What specific factors should you pay attention to in non-tenure track negotiations?

According to Porac there are several considerations to at least raise in your negotiations. [13] Since you are likely to have a large, often undergraduate, teaching commitment, you should see if you can reduce the number of different classes you teach and thereby reduce your class preparation time. This will be particularly important in your first year when you will be doing all you can to be successful. In addition, be sure to check on possible teaching assistant help. Also, see if you can arrange to not teach classes on certain days, T/Th or MWF for example, since this will free you up for other activities.

Also, find out as much as you can about how your teaching will be evaluated and use this information in your course planning.

You will certainly want to know the length of your contract and how you will be evaluated for possible renewal. You need to find out who will make the decision regarding the renegotiation of your contract. As Porac notes, "at some universities contract renewal decisions regarding limited term faculty are made solely by the department chair while at others it is the decision of a committee. You should know whether you must please only one colleague or a committee of colleagues." [13]

Naturally, you will want to know if there is a possibility that your non-tenure track position could be converted to a tenure track appointment. You are not likely to get a firm answer to this question, certainly not one that is binding, and in any case you can be sure that a public search will take place for the position. Your familiarity to your colleagues will have both pluses and minuses in this regard so it is best not to count on such a conversion in your planning.

Finally, remember, a poor, for whatever the reasons, tenure track offer may not be as good as a better non-tenure track offer, at least at the beginning of your academic career. For many potential academics this is an option well worth considering.

References available on request.

#2 Variations on the Theme of Academic Careers: The Non-tenure Track Position

© 2012 American Psychological Association 750 First Street NE, Washington, DC 20002-4242

by Clare Porac, PhD

You are ready to start your search for an academic faculty position. If you are like most graduate students in psychology departments in major research universities, you have been encouraged to search for a full-time tenure-track assistant professor position. However, as recent reports from the *American Association of University Professors (AAUP)* point out, the number of available tenure-track positions has dwindled in recent years. According to the AAUP, currently 65 percent of university/college instructors are

non-tenure track faculty. The AAUP reports that the largest increase in university faculty positions in recent years has been in the category of full-time, non-tenure track positions. These types of full-time faculty positions are called by a variety of names at different universities so you might see them advertised as non-tenure track, fixed term, limited term or contract positions and they carry the academic rank of lecturer, instructor or, occasionally, visiting assistant professor. Often these positions are advertised with specific responsibilities included, for example, coordination of a multisection course such as introductory psychology.

Since a tenure-track position, eventually culminating in the granting of tenure, is the current Holy Grail of academic careers, under what circumstances might you search for and accept a full-time, non-tenure track faculty position? Typically, there are four situations that could lead you in this direction:

The two body problem: You and your partner are both seeking full-time academic positions either in the same department (psychology) or in different academic departments (for example, psychology and anthropology). If there is only one tenure-track vacancy to be filled and a second full-time position is created to accommodate an accompanying partner, it is often easier from an administrative point of view, for department chairs and/or deans to create a second non-tenure track faculty line.

Running out of money: You have just about finished your dissertation but your years of graduate study have taken a financial toll. Your income from various sources is running low or running out and you may be amassing a large debt because of student loans. You decide to relieve your mounting financial burden by taking a limited term full-time faculty position while you finish writing your dissertation. Being ABD (all but dissertation) is not a disadvantage in a search for limited term faculty positions.

Sticking around: You may want to extend your stay in a particular geographic area beyond your graduate school years. Your desire to stay put may be for personal or professional reasons. For example, you want to remain at your current location because your partner is still working on a degree or you want to complete a research or writing project with a collaborator at your university.

The best option: You may be offered both a tenure-track and a non-tenure track position and you find that the non-tenure track position is more desirable from a number of points of view, such as departmental quality or geographic area.

If a non-tenure track faculty position looks like an option for you, what should you know about these types of faculty positions, and what should you know about yourself and your potential for being happy in a contract, non-tenure track, slot?

First, you must love undergraduate teaching because you will be doing a lot of it. Contract faculty teach more undergraduate course sections each semester than tenure-

track faculty. Contract faculty typically teach four to five undergraduate course sections each semester as compared to the two to three taught by tenure-track faculty. This difference is based on the idea that contract faculty are hired as teaching specialists who are not expected to do much research. For this reason, it would be very helpful to have had undergraduate teaching experience when you decide to include such a position in your academic search.

There are several important and specific questions that you should ask when you interview for a limited term position:

Can I reduce the course preparation time by teaching several sections of the same course? Teaching four sections of introductory psychology, where there is only one course preparation, would not be as burdensome time wise as teaching four different psychology courses.

How will students evaluate my teaching and my courses? Given that undergraduate teaching will constitute your academic life, you should know about the departmental procedures for evaluating instructors and courses.

What is the length of my contract and how will I be evaluated for contract renewal? The most common contract terms are one to three years for a first appointment. If reappointment decisions include an assessment of your teaching activities and some expectation of a limited amount of research and publication output, then ask about the availability of funds for conference attendance and research assistance and laboratory space.

Who will make the decision regarding my contract renewal? At some universities contract renewal decisions regarding limited term faculty are made solely by the department chair while at others it is the decision of a committee. You should know whether you must please only one colleague or a committee of colleagues.

Will the contract position be converted to a tenure-track position in the future? Often non-tenure track positions are created as stop gap measures in tight budgetary times but can be converted to tenure-track positions when the budget situation improves. However, even if you are told that conversion to a tenure-track position is possible, you should not accept such a position with this thought in mind. Some universities require that departments conduct national searches to fill tenure-track positions so existing non-tenure track faculty are not automatically deemed to be eligible to fill the position. Familiarity breeds contempt is a sad fact of academic life. A fresh face may be more attractive to your colleagues conducting the search, leaving you at a disadvantage among the pool of potential candidates for the tenure-track position. Although there are occasions when contract faculty move to a tenure-track position in the same department, you should not count on this happening to you.

A final but important consideration is the attitudinal climate in the department related to contract faculty. This attitude will be conveyed to you during the interview process, so it is crucial that you pay attention to specific events:

Has your interview been carefully arranged with a set schedule of activities including the opportunity for you to interact with both tenure-track and contract faculty in the department?

Since teaching psychology undergraduates will be your major responsibility, have you been asked to guest lecture in an undergraduate course and is your lecture attended by members of the department involved in the search?

Will you have individual office space?

Will you have full access to computer facilities and other technologies needed for teaching undergraduate courses?

Will you be able to participate in and have voting privileges at departmental meetings, especially on matters related to the undergraduate curriculum and budget allocations?

If after your interview, the answer to most of these questions is no, it indicates that departmental members do not consider the hiring of contract faculty to be an important matter. It also indicates that the contribution of contract faculty to the ongoing activities of the department is not considered to be equal to that of the tenured and tenure-track faculty. Second-class citizenship status awaits you if you become a non-tenure track faculty member in a department that has conducted a haphazard and off-hand search to fill the position. If filling the position is not taken seriously, the person filling the position will not be taken seriously either.

What could your life be like as a contract full-time faculty member in a psychology department? In the best circumstances, you could do quite well. Although you may be too busy teaching to apply for grants on your own, you could collaborate with colleagues and continue research and publication without the pressure of conforming to the timing of a tenure clock.

Many new PhDs and soon-to-be PhDs take contract faculty positions to fulfill short term goals and only plan to stay in these positions for the duration of one contract. If this is your situation then continuing to do research and to publish is essential especially if your eventual aim is to apply for tenure-track positions.

If you plan to stay in a contract position for a number of years, because you love undergraduate teaching, you are good at it, and you are not interested in the intense publication pressures that go along with tenure-track positions, you can integrate your teaching and research interests by engaging in the scholarship and writing that surrounds

the teaching of psychology. Non-tenure track positions offer the opportunity for you to become both the teaching specialist and the teaching scholar, which is a nice integration if undergraduate teaching is your love.

#3 Negotiating the Non-Tenure Track

The Chronicle of Higher Education, July 6, 2011

Copyright 2012. All rights reserved. The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 2003

By Cathy Trower

The data tell the story: From 1975 to 1999, the proportion of full-time faculty members in non-tenure-track positions increased to 28 percent from 19 percent. Recent estimates suggest that 45 percent of all new hires in academe are on the non-tenure track, including 65 percent at research universities.

A good many faculty members in non-tenure-track positions are unhappy with that state of affairs although it's unlikely to change. They are unhappy, in part, with the low salaries and high teaching loads that characterize many non-tenure-track positions. But it would be a mistake to assume that all of these academics would prefer the tenure track.

The Project on Faculty Appointments, where I work at Harvard University, conducted a survey of more than 2,000 doctoral candidates at 65 top-tier universities in 1999-2000. It showed that 20 percent of students in the social sciences and humanities, 29 percent in the sciences, and 28 percent in the professions of business, education, and engineering would accept a non-tenure-track offer over a tenure-track offer holding everything equal about the two positions. That's a rather startling conclusion given that the ultimate goal for most aspiring faculty members has always been to land a tenure-track job.

Throughout graduate school, scholars are socialized to tenure, an employment policy so entrenched that it defines the culture of the academy. Economic security, academic freedom, and autonomy -- what's not to love? Why settle for anything less?

Senior scholars may raise their eyebrows, but in fact, more and more scholars are opting for life off the tenure track. Does this mean they are settling for less? The answer is no; in fact, many are negotiating for more in the process. There appear to be three logical groupings of doctoral candidates who prefer the non-tenure track.

The strategists

Many young scholars are shrewdly calculating the trade-offs when choosing the non-tenure route over the tenure track. They will opt for a non-tenured post if, for example, it means being on a campus in a prime geographic location and securing a favorable balance of research and teaching duties. These young scholars say quality of life is what most matters to them. They are not interested in living like their professors -- all work and no play, all job and no family time. Here's what some of the strategists we surveyed

had to say:

"I traded security for prestige, I guess. I accepted a non-tenure-track job at the most prestigious university. Hopefully, it'll keep me. If not, the track record I establish while here will help me land my next job. Having a non-tenure-track position at a "good" school is better, in my view, than a tenure-track one at a "bad" school."

"For me, the decision was not difficult at all. I took a non-tenure-track position in a beautiful location that is one where my husband can find work, my children can grow up happily and in safety, and we can experience all that this area has to offer. In addition, I get to focus on research. That was not the case with the tenure-track jobs I was offered. I would have had to do everything -- teaching, research, and service."

"In my field -- business -- there is absolutely no stigma associated with the non-tenure track. This option offered more money than tenure-track offers, and I'm allowed to pursue my research interests. I may decide to leave academe in a few years anyway, so why spend them toiling on the tenure track for a low salary?"

The pragmatists

For others, the decision to take a non-tenure-track job is less about trade-offs than about accepting reality. For this group of scholars, their decision was based on pragmatic considerations. Bottom line -- they needed a job and the odds of it being on the tenure track seemed long. And many pragmatists feel that tenure is no longer a guarantee anyway. Here's what some of them had to say in our survey:

"Sure, tenure would be great, but I need a job. I have loans to repay, a family to feed, and a life to live. I can't waste too much time searching for the perfect offer that might never come along."

"Given the tight job market for faculty in math, there is no shame in taking a non-tenure-track position. I'm applying for anything for which I'm reasonably qualified. You go where you get an offer, tenure track or not."

"From what I've been reading, tenure is just another old sacred cow that might get slaughtered. Tenure is like the Social Security system; I'm not going to count on it. I was much more interested in where the job was and what I'd be doing than in whether it was tenurable or not."

The nonconformists

These are the folks who want greater flexibility in their careers. They like the idea of working free of the tenure clock, and are simply less, or not at all, concerned about their economic security and their academic freedom. Some dislike the very idea of tenure, or have concerns about the process. Here's what they had to say:

"For me, there really was no dilemma. I only considered non-tenure-track jobs. The tenure-track offers I had would have required excellence in all areas. With this

job, I can focus on what matters to me -- teaching."

"I could not do my best work to the ticking of someone's arbitrary tenure clock. Where's the sense in that? This way, I do my job more to my own terms (and of course also to the terms of the contract). And as long as I perform well, I have every reason to believe that I'll be renewed each term."

"The tenure process is completely screwed up as far as I'm concerned. I've seen what it does to people. You can't speak your mind for seven years while you do what everyone else tells you to do and you get mixed messages about what's important in the tenure process. Too many of my colleagues on the tenure track are miserable. I chose the non-tenure track and I'm so happy that I did."

Making the most of the non-tenure track

If the only job offer you received was off the tenure track, you have little room to negotiate better terms. But if you have received both tenure-track and non-tenure-track offers, you have some thinking to do. Don't automatically dismiss the non-tenured post. You might use your tenure-track offers and your willingness to work under contract as leverage to negotiate a sweeter deal.

Here's what you might negotiate:

A higher salary. It is not uncommon for certain non-tenure-track positions to pay salary premiums of 10 to 12 percent over the tenure-track rate.

Your work and workload. Most entry-level, non-tenure-track positions allow the scholar to focus on either teaching or research, instead of both. Some institutions offer promotions in rank to non-tenure-track faculty members.

More-frequent sabbaticals. Some institutions that offer junior scholars a choice of positions give more sabbatical time to those who opt for the non-tenure track.

Seed money. Scholars most interested in a research position may be able to negotiate more start-up money, laboratory space, and graduate-student assistance by choosing a position where they are ineligible for tenure.

A stepping stone into a tenure-track job. You might be able to prove yourself in a non-tenure-track position, and then move into a tenure-track slot when one becomes available. However, when tallying the figures for the tenure clock, many institutions do not count the years spent off the tenure track.

A non-tenure-track position does not come without some sacrifices, however. Here are some of the things you might have to give up:

1. Status and prestige. Many non-tenure-track professors feel like second-class citizens on their campuses and in their disciplines. One factor that affects status is whether promotion in rank is available for non-tenure-track scholars. Several recent studies have suggested that such promotions are available at about a third of U.S.

institutions.

2. Academic freedom. The research on this issue is mixed. Some contract faculty members feel that their academic freedom is secure under due-process laws and campus policies that apply to all faculty members. But others say they feel vulnerable and hesitate to provoke controversy or voice opinions radically different from their colleagues. Many observers, however, would argue that junior scholars on the tenure track feel much the same way.
3. A voice in governance, hiring, and curriculum. The degree of involvement that non-tenure-track professors have on these matters varies widely from one campus to another -- from little or no say to complete voting privileges. Be sure to read a college's policy manuals if this is an important issue for you. Private institutions are much more likely than public ones to allow contract faculty members to participate in governance.
4. Support for professional development. Professors on the tenure track are much more likely to receive such support, especially when it comes to sabbatical leave. Only about a quarter of U.S. institutions offer sabbatical leave to non-tenure-track professors.

As you're mulling your options, remember that being on the tenure track is not the same as having tenure and does not guarantee that you will get it. And even tenure is no guarantee of a job for life. It doesn't happen often, but institutions do have the power to dismiss tenured professors for financial exigency, program closure, or sustained poor performance. Read the faculty handbook on your campus and review all faculty appointment politics thoroughly -- you might be surprised by what you find.

While you're at it, read your employment contract carefully. Term contracts have varying lengths. Some institutions employ faculty members on term contracts for only a finite period.

Finally, ask about the success rates of junior professors both on and off the tenure track at institutions where you are considering employment. What proportion of faculty members who come up for tenure in the department actually get it? And what proportion of faculty members working on contracts get renewed? If people in the department can't answer these questions, that also tell you something.

Full-time, non-tenure-track appointments are here to stay. And some institutions are making changes to overcome the negative aspects of these positions and to ensure that all scholars, whatever track they are on, feel fulfilled and motivated. After all, a happy faculty is a productive faculty.

Cathy Trower is a senior researcher (not eligible for tenure) at the Project on Faculty Appointments at Harvard University, sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts. These are her views and not the opinions of the foundation.