

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR NEW AND ASPIRING COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

**by Douglas Wheeler, Head, Department of Music, Clayton State University,
Morrow, Georgia**

Following are what is hoped to be helpful information for new and aspiring college professors as they search for their first position (or any position for that matter) and work through the tenure and promotion process in order to reach a stable period in their academic career. This information is based on my own experience in both applying for positions (serving at two institutions in two states in my career), as a member of numerous search committees, and serving as Department Head for over 16 years. At my first institution, I started with a master's degree at the rank of instructor and (after beginning and competing the doctorate) was later promoted all the way up to full professor with tenure and department head. As department head, I have had the privilege to hire and recommend for promotion and tenure faculty, serve as chair of ad hoc faculty grievance committees, and unfortunately to be in a position to have to fire faculty.

It is acknowledged that people are different, that positions are different, and that institutions are different. However, I will attempt to make my comments general enough to apply to many individuals and institutions.

The application process - When in your career should you apply? This depends on lots of factors which fall basically into two categories - personal and institutional. The personal include your professional goals as well as your family and financial situation. Some institutions require the master's degree, some require the completed doctorate. Other institutions want to hire ABD faculty (in order to get them in at a lower rank and salary) and then promote them later after their completion of the doctorate. The best type of position for you, if you want to stay with an institution is a tenure track position. This means that you can stay with this institution for your career. Probably the least favorable position is as an adjunct. However, it does get your foot in the door of college teaching, and I have seen people start at an institution as an adjunct and later turn it into full-time employment.

There are a number of ways to find out about openings. These include position announcements in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, university placement offices, The College Music Society, the web-site <http://www.higheredjobs.com/>, etc. Be sure to write the application letter specifically to items specified in the position announcement for each institution. In this day of computers and word processing software, applicants need to be extremely careful not to send out the same letter for all positions. Remember, you must set your letter apart from all the others so that the search committee does not place yours at the bottom of the pile. I remember doing just that when a recent doctoral graduate used the wrong university name when mentioning how excited he would be to teach at X university!! This is more than a faux pas - it killed this applicant's chance to make the short list the first time around. If committee members sense that your is a form letter and they get the feeling that you might not even have read the position announcement - with its specifics - they can very easily place your application aside. Committee members are looking for reasons to either continue looking at your application or to place it in the stack of those not to consider. Make sure your stands out! Remember, at this stage of the game (and even later on), you are trying to sell yourself.

Most institutions look for people for specific teaching responsibilities, i.e. artist/teacher of clarinet, direct the woodwind choir, teach woodwind methods, recruit clarinet students, other duties as needed or assigned. Be sure to write specifically to those duties

mentioned in the position announcement. This will set your letter apart from the others. Also, be aware that this position announcement is an important document. It is the first of the documents that the university will use to evaluate the quality of your work. In this document, the university sets out its requirements, expectations, etc. If you get to the point where you accept the job, it also forms the basis of mutual understanding between you and the university of what is required of you in the position. If there is something in there you do not like (recruiting, teaching music appreciation, etc.) then it is better not to apply than to go for the position and try to change the job description once you have been hired. Sometimes, if you make yourself valuable to the institution, they may well ask you to do or teach something that was not on the original job description, however, it reflects poorly on your application for tenure/promotion if you begin trying to weasel your way out of one or more of the important parts of the advertised job soon after your arrival!

Once you have submitted your application, do not call the institution to see where the committee is in the application process or where you stack up. These committees typically take time to do their work. If they are looking for someone with your experience, they will contact you. When they contact you, they will want to move quickly for phone interviews, etc. So, if you are going to be away (out of town), be sure to have an answering machine or give the committee contact information - e-mail or cell phone - and be sure to check these at least a couple of times a day. You do not want to miss out on a job because the committee could not contact you.

The interview process - It is typical these days that schools will set up phone interviews in order to develop a short list of those candidates whom they will interview in person. Generally, a member of the committee will call you to set up a mutually agreeable time for the phone interview. If this happens, be sure to begin doing your homework if you have not already. Ask who will be interviewing you (members of the search committee). Go to the institution's web site and find out everything you can about the institution that makes it unique. What accreditations do they have - what degrees - what makes the institution stand out - what do they do well - how long has the institution been in existence? What is the history and size of the music department? Go to the search committee members' home pages and find out everything you can about them. Is there a separate performance venue under separate management? Find out who the management is and what their relationship is to the music department. Make notes that you will have in front of you during the phone interview. Certainly the search committee will ask you if you have any questions - be sure to prepare a couple. It will show them that you are interested, have done your homework, and have given some consideration to this position and this particular school. On the institutions' web-site, you should be able to read the institution's catalog and perhaps even their faculty handbook with information on tenure and promotion. This might be located under the Vice-President for Academic Affairs' home page. If so, you can examine their standards to see if you would have a chance of getting promoted and tenured using their guidelines. You will also get an insight into their faculty recruiting policy. This will help you to understand their process and timing as they move forward.

Be sure to sound positive and confident during the phone interview. This is a little awkward, as the search committee cannot see your facial and bodily gestures and you cannot see theirs. Perhaps you can even have a friend give you a mock phone interview to prepare you for this process ahead of time. Get the friend's response as to how well you came across over the phone.

Following the phone interview, it would not hurt to send a follow up note of thanks to individual members of the search committee for their time spent with you during the

interview process. Again, this will help your candidacy stand out above the others.

The on-campus interview - If you make the cut following the phone interview and are invited to the institution to interview/audition on-site, be sure to continue doing your homework. You should have learned a great deal during the phone interview. If they asked questions which you had difficulty answering, be sure to make notes and do better at the on-site interview. If you are to speak, teach, and/or audition, be sure to be well prepared. Will you give a PowerPoint presentation; will you have handouts, will you use technology, what kind of technology do they have in the classroom where you will teach? Although almost anything goes these days for college professors in terms of dress, be sure to put your best foot forward at the interview. Whatever you do, do not dress down as this could make a negative impression that gives the next candidate the edge. Be sure to present a confident, positive, friendly air. If you go to dinner with the search committee or others, be sure to speak to each member individually and even ask specific questions about their teaching. This will show that you are interested in them and help them to have a positive impression of you.

The negotiations - If you are offered the position - this usually happens after you return home - you will also be offered a specific salary and rank. It could be advantageous to you to go in at a lesser rank with the understanding that you are up for promotion soon and there is a salary increase associated with that promotion. If the campus has unionized faculty, find out what that means for you. Whatever salary you are offered will basically "stick with you" as long as you are employed by that institution. Any percentage raises from now on will be based upon what you can negotiate when accepting the position. But handle this carefully. You do not want to alienate your administrator at this point either. He/she may have done all they can to get you the most money they could before making an offer. Usually you can get some idea about whether the institution pays on the upper end of lower end of salaries. Also, music faculty are probably paid less than coaches, business faculty, etc. Applicants should understand that this is NOT the same as public school salaries which are locked into degrees and years of service. So, try to get the most you can, but, again, handle this very carefully. If you want this position, take it even if you are somewhat disappointed in the salary. Remember, you do have opportunities later to increase your salary through merit pay increases and by getting promoted.

The first years - As you work at keeping the job and **tenure/promotion** - remember, you still are trying to sell yourself. The university is not obliged to keep you. Make them feel that they cannot do without you! Be sure to make yourself available for extra teaching assignments, committee assignments, and other service work that will be helpful to the department and university. Remember who will be evaluating your tenure/promotion materials and be on the lookout for ways to impress them and the university administrators in general. Be collegial with all those with whom you work. Never say to one of your direct reports, when asked to do something, "I didn't know that was in the job description." People who get ahead in any institution are those that make themselves valuable to them.

Some institutions have official mentoring systems in which new faculty members are placed with experienced ones who can explain university policy, help answer questions, help the new faculty member prepare for annual evaluations and or pre-tenure review and promotion and tenure applications. If your institutions does not have an official policy on mentors, perhaps you can ask your department head if he/she could assign someone to you on an "unofficial" basis. This can be very helpful as new faculty often have many questions especially during their first year. This can be a way of not having to go to the department head for every little question and appear to him/her to be "high maintenance." In fact, it is

important to appear to be positive and certainly NOT a troublemaker. I have seen people subvert their career at an institution in first few months by putting the administrator in a position where he/she has to take a stand that ends the person's career at that institution. Do not shoot yourself in the foot.

Most institutions have open door policies meaning that faculty are free to go to the dean, provost, president, etc. about things. My advice to you - find out what type of environment is on your campus. In some places, it is fine to go in and talk with upper administrators. Be careful of what you say here. Do not say things about your direct report that you would later regret. In others, talking to upper administrators is seen as going "over the head" of your direct report and is considered in to be in bad taste. Go to your mentor first if you have a problem and then your department head. If the department head serves at the pleasure of the dean and or President, he/she is probably going to have the support of that person. If you go over the head of your administrator it is possible for you to lose credibility, and, if it happens often enough even greater consequences depending on university policy. Certainly, if the upper administrator asks you to come in and chat, etc. this is a different story. But faculty members who continually go over the head of their direct report become known as trouble makers and high maintenance. The department head or dean could look for ways to make your life difficult.

Universities typically **evaluate** their professors in three categories: teaching, service, and scholarship. Find out what the requirements are (remember, this might have been on the institution's web-site which you researched prior to the on-campus interview.) You need to know whether the requirements are such that you have a chance at getting promoted and tenured. Sometimes certain evidentiary sources are required. Be sure to know what these are as well. Some institutions require the doctorate for tenure, some do not. If your institution requires the completed doctorate and you do not have it, are you willing and able to complete it within the time frame required by your employing institution?

Don't take anything for granted. The evaluation of teaching is not a given. What are the requirements? Are excellent student evaluations important? Must you show the use of technology in your teaching? Are you responsible for recruiting students to your studio/ensemble? Must you show continuing course and/or curriculum development and improvement? Are external evaluations of your teaching optional/required?

What about service? Is it important for you to advise students? Is committee work required? Department level? School level? University level? Is service outside the university required? Are there percentage values the university or you assign to the various requirements for annual evaluations, and pre-tenure review, promotion and tenure review, and post-tenure review? I asked a junior faculty member what advise he could give others. He said that young faculty members should try to get involved as quickly as possible in committee work at the school/college or university level. Since music departments are often isolated geographically from other departments within the same school/college, music faculty must seek out opportunities to get onto school and university committees.

Are there scholarship requirements at all levels of rank? What are they? Is membership in professional organizations a requirement? Is leadership in professional organizations a requirement? Are publication, composition, performance, or professional presentations required? If publication is required, must it be in refereed journals, must it be in the form of book chapters, etc.? Are you required to attend professional development training? Do you need to present at professional meetings?

Are there certain types and/or numbers of evidentiary sources required in each of the areas of teaching, service, and scholarship? Do the numbers increase as you get

promoted? Do they fit with your career goals? If not, perhaps you should look elsewhere for a position because these are the standards upon which you will be evaluated. These are not requirements with which you are free to argue or negotiate. University policy is applicable to all and preserves fairness to all. The policies are published so that everyone is aware of them. It is your job to meet them if you wish to stay with the institution and/or be promoted and granted tenure. Be sure to know how the various administrators view these various areas. Hopefully, they are all on the same page, however, there are times when the Department Head is more concerned with teaching and the Provost is more concerned with scholarship. It will be up to you to be able to keep all these plates spinning. Be sure you are able to meet all the requirements for promotion and tenure. This can demand careful time management so that you can keep up to speed with everything.

Sometimes your evaluation may receive a number rating. If your institution is awarding merit pay (i.e. all faculty do NOT receive the same percentage pay in a given year but different percentages) it could be based on the ranking of this number system from your annual evaluation which might be based on a portfolio. Merit pay is a nice incentive to do good work as it is appreciated and awarded in monetary ways.

The post-tenure review - It is common now for institutions to have post-tenure review of senior faculty members. This is set in place so that faculty continue to maintain high standards in the areas of teaching, service, and scholarship. If problems are noted at this stage, some type of remediation system might be put into place so that the faculty member has a period of time to improve his/her work.

Conclusion - Whether or not collegiality is measured and/or rated for promotion and tenure, it sure is a nice attribute to have when working in an institutional setting. It simply makes life more pleasant for all. Some junior faculty make the mistake of thinking that they are simply a brain with feet and that it does not matter what kind of person he/she is. Believe me, it does matter what kind of person you are. Students, colleagues and administrators all appreciate caring, friendly faculty members. So, as you approach the career of your dreams, be sure to go above and beyond the 'required' expectations. Make the institution desire to keep you, promote you, and even desire to do more for you than is 'required'.

I hope the above information is helpful and useful. College/university teaching is a wonderful profession. It is one in which you can grow as a teacher musician/academic, have a positive influence on the next generation of musicians and educators, and contribute to the larger university community in satisfying ways. Best wishes as you pursue a challenging yet satisfying career.