

4 Steps to Build Both Tenure and Research Career

Are you a junior faculty member who wants to achieve tenure while maintaining an independent research career?

If so, it will take strategy, self-direction, and strong professional networks, according to **Dr. Greg Ball**, Vice Dean for Science and Research Infrastructure at Johns Hopkins University. Here are four steps he suggests:

1. Design your own roadmap

First, he says, **develop a long-term plan**, taking into account your career goals and your institution's tradition and policies on tenure. The latter will vary according to the type of institution — research university, academic medical center, state college, etc.

“You need to understand your institution's exact rules for promotion to tenure — the criteria and how they are weighed,” says Dr. Ball. “This conversation should ... happen very early upon (your) arrival so you have a roadmap on how to balance your activities.” A common tenure criterion in many schools, according to Dr. Ball: “... if [you] do not have a certain level of student satisfaction on teaching surveys you won't be promoted. If that's how it works at your school, ... make sure you invest (time and effort) in your teaching.”

For example, **read student evaluations** closely so you'll know exactly what teaching areas you need to improve, then **take advantage of faculty development offices** or similar resources that many institutions have to help you learn to read the evaluations properly, sharpen your teaching skills, or adopt new methods.

If your institution lacks a structured tenure process and timelines, **talk to colleagues, mentors, and the department chair** to create your own. Ball recommends a candid discussion with your chair to make certain you understand what is expected in terms of teaching, service, research, and other professional commitments, and to seek advice on how to juggle these obligations.

A good way to approach this is to express a strong desire to do service as well as service teaching, but ask that it be staged so that you have less to do in the initial years of your appointment in order to help you launch your career as an independent scientist. While work/life balance is certainly relevant, take care not to use family commitments as an excuse but rather a factor to be considered. For example, it's OK to ask not to be assigned to committees that meet in the evening if you have young children who need to be picked up from day care by 5 p.m.

Once you have plotted your roadmap, put it in writing and revisit it at regular intervals to make sure you are meeting targets or need to adjust them. **Keep an up-to-date, comprehensive CV** to help track your progress and be ready for reviews. What should be in the CV? Everything you've done, Dr. Ball says — every conference presentation, successful and unsuccessful grant proposal, publications submitted, articles reviewed, commentaries, external and internal committee service, citations of your work by others, etc. Also keep a folder of student evaluations, letters from colleagues, and other evidence of scholarly and teaching activity.

2. Think beyond your institution

“One of ... the paradoxes of the whole thing is (that) your research achievement is evaluated by people outside the institution. Developing a reputation ... and having a ‘professional impact’ requires the right combination of publications, conference presentations, and participation in professional societies,” Dr. Ball explains. Rule No. 1 for tenure-track faculty, he says, is to **have a pipeline of papers in the works** at all times.

“The coin of the realm is the data paper. If you don’t publish the data you have collected, you aren’t going anywhere. If you go to conferences and people get excited about your work, and then they can’t follow up and read a paper — either the paper has already appeared, is about to appear, or will appear — that’s a problem. People aren’t going to take the work seriously.”

One of the best ways to develop your impact is to **be active in your professional societies** and attend annual conferences where others in your field get to know you and become familiar with your work.

“You can ... summarize five or six data papers in a presentation and someone important in the field will immediately understand what you are doing, whereas (they) might not have the time to read the five or six papers,” says Dr. Ball. “If you ... have a body of work you are known for and identified with, then when the time comes [for others] to comment during your tenure review, they will think: ‘She’s made a really great contribution.’”

Dr. Ball discourages the common practice of attending different conferences in alternating years. While attendees may overlap, each group has a particular profile. The best approach, he says, is to plan your schedule to **attend one or two key annual conferences and to accept invitations to small, specialized conferences.**

3. Protect your time

Finding the right balance between mandatory (i.e., teaching, advising, and committees) and optional time commitments (i.e., journal reviews and commentary) requires good time management. Be frank in discussions with your chair and mentor to protect your time, learning which service commitments are more difficult and which teaching commitments take the most time. “A good department will work with a faculty member so that they can have the time and effort to develop their career,” Dr. Ball says.

Other time commitments are more discretionary. While writing review papers and commenting on other papers shows intellectual depth and helps people appreciate your ability to impact the field, don’t let these distract you from your own publications. “If you write great reviews, editors are going to appreciate it and ask you to write more,” says Dr. Ball.

“If you are working hard to get your own paper out — your main story — and you have three papers stacked up on your desk to review, you should **re-think how many times you say ‘Yes.’**”

Being on an editorial board is one of the best ways to increase visibility and sets a clear, manageable boundary: Review only for those journals where you're on the board, have a clear responsibility, and that responsibility is recognized. But how do you get on such boards? In Ball's experience, requesting membership on an editorial board often backfires; one must be invited. If asked to review for a journal of less interest to you, then decline so that you can focus your efforts on "meritorious reviewing" for preferred journals to position yourself for an invitation to join their editorial boards.

4. Be identified with your line of research

Independent investigators pursue their own line of research. Instead of doing the next obvious incremental experiment from your thesis, **be open to new tools and new collaborators** who might take you in another direction.

If you follow your thesis, consider to what extent it is identified with you or your pre-doc or post-doc mentor and to what extent you can take it in a direction that will give you an identity. "Collaborating is important and people value it, but if your collaborations are with people who are well-known in the field and very senior, sometimes you do not get the full credit you need," cautions Dr. Ball.

Finishing work you started with your advisor is fine as long as you're also developing a clear line on your own with your own students and post-docs. If you want to collaborate, **find someone new who is your age and an approximate peer** vs. someone whose work and reputation might be perceived as overly beneficial to you.

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