# Life After Rejection

Mark Biggin

**T**he day chemist Rebecca Conry's tenure decision came at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), she sat waiting alone at home for the department chair to call. Conry had warned her students that if she wasn't in her office the next day, it meant she didn't get tenure. She wasn't pessimistic, but neither did she think she was a shoo-in. She suspected she had spent too much time teaching, mentoring undergraduates in her lab, and writing proposals for grants that were unrealistic at her early stage of career development. All these activities came at the expense of acquiring data and getting publications out the door. Conry figured the decision could go either way.

Yet when she received the bad news, she was devastated. Like most college professors, she was used to the feeling of success. "At first you go, 'Wow, I'm a failure,' " Conry says. "But then you have to pull back and figure out where to go next. You have to look at an experience like that and say, 'What can I learn from it?' "

> If you are a person with a Ph.D. degree, that means you are good at at least one thing, whether you get tenure or not. You know how to solve problems.
>
> —Clifford Mintz

(Courtesy, Rebecca Conry )

Rebecca Conry

Conry's tenure denial came in the fall, just as job advertisements were appearing. That meant she didn't have much time to sit and stew. She had to figure out what she wanted to do next. She thought about the energy she had devoted to teaching and to mentoring her undergraduate researchers. These activities were part of what had led to her nontenure, but they were also clues, Conry says: "When I looked at what I excelled at and enjoyed, it was telling me to go to a different kind of institution." Recognizing that she wanted to focus more on teaching, she limited her job search to institutions that offered only bachelor's and master's degree programs. Meanwhile, she negotiated with UNR to buy her lab equipment for what she considered "a reasonable price" so that she could take it with her. All she had to do was find a new home at an institution willing to pay to move it.

That fall, she got two interviews, and then two offers. She accepted a position at Colby College, a private liberal arts college in Waterville, Maine. When she got to Colby, she was on a shortened tenure clock. "I just said okay, I need to hit it hard and do the best I can."

Working at a small institution was vastly different from working at a large state university, she soon found, and not just because she was teaching the equivalent of five courses per year (including lab sections) instead of two while still having significant research expectations. Tuition is high, so her students "expect their teachers to be excellent as teachers, to know their names, to be available to them a lot more, and to get to know them as individuals," Conry says. "That's an adjustment, but one that I enjoyed because the students are so engaged." Conry met the standard. Colby awarded her tenure in 2004.

## A poor fit makes job loss a relief

Garet Lahvis was a 4th-year assistant professor of surgery at the University of Wisconsin (UW), Madison, when his department chair told him that his studies of social motivation and communication in mice--research with implications for autism and drug addiction--had moved too far from the department's focus on clinical plastic surgery and that the department would have to let him go. The news stung, he says, but "in some ways, it was kind of a relief because it was clear that I was going down a path that was not of interest to my colleagues."

(Courtesy, Garet Lahvis)

Garet Lahvis

The early warning gave Lahvis a couple of years to look for a job. He cast his net wide but also tried, with intensive support from colleagues in other departments, to find a new home within UW Madison in part to allow his wife, UW pediatrician Melissa Weddle, to keep her job. But as time went on, he began to realize that UW wasn't going to find a place for him; it was time to move on.

Had he understood how "colossally slowly" administrations work, Lahvis now says, he would have spent less time trying to get another job at UW and more time writing grants and continuing his research. "The harshest part at the end was that I had written all these applications; I [already] knew I was gone." But when his friends found out, they were "frustrated and angry. I felt like I was consoling my friends."

In 2008, Lahvis accepted a tenure-track job in behavioral neuroscience at Oregon Health and Science University in Portland. He's happy and productive there, he says. The change was hard on his family--especially Weddle, who left her prestigious academic position just after receiving a promotion. But he says for him, from a career standpoint, "it was good."

## After a battle, vindication--and exhaustion

(University of Innsbruck)**On Tenure**

Also in *Science* Careers this week:

- Special Feature: Getting--and Not Getting--Tenure. *Science* Careers describes how to get tenure--and what some people do when they don't.

- "Perspective: Advice on Achieving Tenure." An expert on tenure describes best practices for getting tenure.

- In Person: A Simpler Life. A recently rejected physics professor rediscovers the pleasures of carrots and carpentry as she ponders her future.

When Janet Rowe (not her real name) was denied tenure in a social science department at a western state university a few years ago, she believed the promotion and tenure committee had erred in judging her publication record. So she appealed the decision, initiating an 18-month process during which her application was kicked back to the department's promotion and tenure committee four times.

Administration officials repeatedly urged the committee to reconsider; each time they voted against tenure. Committee members who initially had voted against Rowe had become entrenched, Rowe says. "People didn't talk to me, and frankly, I didn't have much to say to them either." Even among supportive colleagues, she says, "I felt like Eeyore all the time. So I pulled back and withdrew." Eventually, she became so stressed that she took a medical leave of absence, saw a therapist, and started taking Valium to sleep at night.

Eventually the university president overturned the decision, ruling that the committee had violated Rowe's academic freedom and failed to give her file adequate consideration. Rowe was tenured but wounded. She had wasted a year writing nothing but appeal documentation. Physically, she was a wreck. She says her husband is still so "deeply, hotly angry" at the members of the department who voted against her that he could hardly bring himself to attend the award ceremony when she recently won a prestigious endowed teaching professorship.

Today, a year after she won tenure, Rowe's research is back on track. "I'm more productive than I have ever been," she says. But that's partly because she wants out. She plans to leave the university as soon as her son graduates from high school.

Looking back, Rowe is unsure what advice she would offer others considering fighting their tenure denial. "If your case is rock solid and you've got documentation to prove it, I would try it, although I wouldn't discontinue looking for other jobs," she says. Rowe herself was able to obtain ballot comments showing that committee members' justifications shifted over time, she says, so she knew her case was strong. But without that kind of paper trail, "you're screwed," she says. "And either way, you come out scarred. It just takes such a toll."

## A long search for a new path

Teaching at the University of Miami School of Medicine, bacteriologist Clifford Mintz knew his chances for tenure were slim, especially because he wasn't bringing in much grant money. But because the department needed teachers, Mintz says his department chair assured him that "when push came to shove, he was in my corner." Yet, when he went up for tenure, the chair--who had recently accepted a position elsewhere--declined to recommend him for tenure.

(Courtesy, Cliff Mintz)

Cliff Mintz

Mintz filed a complaint, saying he had been led to believe that he would be able to stay on. But he viewed it as a perfunctory exercise; he didn't have much hope for a reversal. He started looking for jobs in industry. "As a guy who did 5 years in postdocs, 7 years in academia, ran a lab, published papers, I thought that my stock in the private sector would be pretty high," Mintz remembers. He got some bites, but soon it became clear that he wouldn't be coming in at the director level, as he had envisioned; he'd be starting all over again. "That was a very psychologically difficult situation to reconcile," Mintz says.

For the next decade, Mintz bounced through about 10 different jobs: in the biotech and pharmaceutical industries, in community college administration, in management consulting and recruiting, and finally in medical communications and marketing. He was fired from a number of jobs and quit others. He's learned, he says, that "I can't work for anybody else. I don't like being told what to do."

In 2006, while working in medical communications for a large pharmaceutical company, he started blogging on the side. Today, he says, his career blog for bioscientists (www.biojobblog.com) gets about 50,000 hits a month, which he figures is not bad. He also runs an online social network for biological scientists (www.biocrowd.com) and works as a freelance medical writer and consultant. [Editor's note: Mintz has written for *Science* Careers.]

"It literally took me 10 years to come to terms with the fact that I didn't get tenure," Mintz says. At first, he feared that not getting tenure signaled to his peers that he wasn't smart enough. Now, though, he interprets it differently: He believes his scientific training has equipped him to reinvent himself as many times as he has needed to. "If you are a person with a Ph.D. degree, that means you are good at at least one thing, whether you get tenure or not. You know how to solve problems."

## Confidence breeds persistence

When biochemist Mark Biggin (pictured at top) was denied tenure in Yale University's department of molecular biophysics and biochemistry in 1998, he was disappointed and a little surprised. However, it wasn't entirely unexpected: Although his work has since been vindicated, at the time it wasn't accepted by some senior members of his department, he says. The tenure decision, he believed, was evidence that Yale wasn't the right intellectual environment for him. "Not getting tenure prodded me to look for a job earlier than I might have done," he says.

Biggin spent a year and a half responding to job ads. In a stroke of bad luck, he lost his funding at about the same time the tenure committee reached its decision, which didn't help his job search. He got interviews but no offers.

And then he won two R01 grants from the National Institutes of Health. As his deadline for leaving Yale drew closer, colleagues nudged him to take a different tack and start calling people he knew. As they pointed out, he had funding so all he needed was space.

Biggin says he was "naïve to networking," but "that was a very good piece of advice, because that's when I picked up the phone to my old postdoc adviser to see if they had some lab space that I could use" as he continued his search for a permanent job. Instead, his former adviser suggested he interview at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBL) near Berkeley, California. It turned out, he says, to be "just a beautiful match because there was a group of people who were interested in working with me. It worked out beautifully."

Now a staff scientist in LBL's Genomics Division, Biggin is collaborating with numerous groups. He feels vindicated in his early assessment that if you have a strong belief in the significance of your work, it's possible to view tenure denial as an opportunity. "If you feel what you've done is accurate and truthful and people are having a hard time accepting it," he says, "you have to just keep going."