**Take-home message**: It normally takes 3-5 years or more to become sufficiently famous as a scholar to warrant tenure. You can begin these 3-5 years while you do your scholarship, or begin them after you do your scholarship. If you wait, it takes that much longer to be tenured. It’s up to you.

**Introduction**

Untenured faculty in the BSD track start preparing for the tenure decision on day one. This is because they are on a clock and they will lose their job if they do not receive tenure. Accordingly they cannot/do not postpone planning to create a dossier that will satisfy the tenure expectations.

By contrast, untenured faculty in the SOM and CS tracks, while eligible for tenure, are neither on a tenure clock nor required to qualify for tenure. Therefore they sometimes do not begin planning for tenure until they are well along in their faculty careers. The problem is: once they start planning for tenure, they may need to spend some years creating a tenurable dossier, delaying tenure even for deserving faculty.

If there is any chance you may someday want tenure, it is prudent to begin your preparation now. Even if you change your mind, the preparations will advance your career.

**Know the rules**

The actual rules are at [https://bsdacademicaffairs.uchicago.edu/page/pathways-successful-faculty-development-and-promotion#4](https://bsdacademicaffairs.uchicago.edu/page/pathways-successful-faculty-development-and-promotion#4)

In summary, you can get tenure if you have made a significant difference in how your peers think or practice in your field. Let’s unpack this. “Significant” is the first key word. Successful tenure cases will often include language such as ground-breaking, path-breaking, major advance, new direction, game-changing, revolutionary, importance, outstanding, a big deal, etc. While this language is often hyperbole, it does not include language such as incremental, minor, solid, ordinary scholarship, etc. Furthermore, the difference made needs to be real, demonstrable, and accomplished. “Have made” is past tense. Works in progress or of potential significance are usually not sufficient. Next, you personally need to be responsible for the significant difference made. Team efforts are just fine as long as your contribution to the team is significant, clear, and enabling. Last, the judgment of your peers will be critical in deciding whether the significance of the accomplishment is sufficient and you are responsible for it. If you have changed thinking or practice in a field but nobody realizes this or its significance, tenure must await the realization.

Note that this language is completely agnostic about whether the significant difference is in non-clinical or clinical knowledge, educational practice, or clinical practice – or in terms of discovery/invention, integration, or theory. The significance of the difference is far more important than the domain in which it occurs.

**Implications of the rules**

In many cases, faculty member in the SOM track undertake scholarship because an observation stokes their curiosity, they fit in to an existing program, or needs or resources become obvious. Nothing is
wrong with such scholarship, which can achieve many goals. But it may not suffice for tenure, however. For tenure, it must sum to the peer-esteemed significant difference for which the faculty member is clearly responsible. Thus, for example:

- A hodgepodge of minor works may be insufficient, whereas the same works integrated in an overall strategy or theme may suffice.

- Works disseminated only to supersubspecialists or UChicago colleagues may attract little notice, whereas the same works in high-visibility outlets may suffice.

- Middle authorships or co-investigatorships on grant applications may fail to impress on their own, whereas obvious consistent contributions to important team efforts may suffice even for the same middle authorships or co-investigatorships.

- Significant differences in how one’s peers think or practice will ordinarily garner invitations to speak, serve, and/or write; the absence of such invitations will imply that the work is not especially significant (even if it is).

Much of this is, frankly, a matter of presentation. Tenurable work can be presented so poorly that its theme, state of completion, significance, and peer regard are not obvious.

It is the job of the faculty member seeking tenure to align the work and its visibility to peers so that the tenure expectations are clearly met. Opportunities for such alignment are in:

The choice of projects: will they contribute to or sum to a ‘significant difference’?

The choice of publication outlets and funding sources: will they support the perception of a ‘significant difference’?

The choice of professional meetings: will they contribute to peer esteem and help explain one’s contribution to team projects?

The choice among invitations to speak, serve, and write: do they really enhance peer esteem?

Interaction with colleagues at UChicago: can they help project one into situations in which peer esteem is enhanced?

Interactions with ‘leading peers’ (i.e., the big names, hopefully at leading institutions): they may be consulted about tenure; do they know the work and the worker?

Pragmatics

Ordinarily faculty who achieve tenure devote a significant fraction of their effort to their tenurable work. [There are exceptions, however; sometimes the tenurable accomplishment is produced in one’s spare time or requires little or no protected time.] The usual way to increase effort for tenurable work is to obtain funding. This is good for the faculty member, the institution, and more importantly for the eventual tenure case. Peer-reviewed funding is one indicator of peer esteem, and its absence raises the question of whether the accomplishment is actually all that important.

For that matter, recognize that tenure represents a potentially life-long commitment, and the tenuring institution needs to be confident that both the work is sustainable both intellectually and financially. Take care to provide evidence that both the accomplishment and any funding are not one-time.
As stated, tenure at UChicago is for work that makes a difference in how one’s peers think and practice. It is not for being an outstanding clinician, educator, institutional citizen, and/or ‘valuable colleague’ – unless this performance changes how one’s peer community outside the institution think or practice. Many faculty members both at UChicago and outside do not understand this point, and so can provide misleading feedback about readiness for tenure and strategies to achieve it. Beware!

Ordinarily the first step in a tenure case from the SOM track is a discussion among your departmental leadership and deans. The first question the deans will ask is: For what significant difference in thinking or practice is the candidate responsible? It would be prudent for the tenure candidate to prepare departmental leadership to answer this question.

**Timing**

If tenure might be a goal, it would be prudent to orchestrate one’s work and the cultivation of peer esteem as soon as possible. If one waits until the body of work that will support tenure is in hand to do this, then one may need to wait further until the theme of the work and its significance becomes clear to the peer community and the supporting invitations to speak, serve, and write also arrive.

Recall also that tenure is for *having made* a significant difference. The difference cannot be potential or implied, but complete enough to impress peer reviewers that it is actual and real.

Our rules are that the Provost will consider tenure only once for a given individual. Premature attempts will forever after preclude tenure.