

Earning Your Keep: The University Drumline Instructor in a Non-Tenure Earning Position

By Gene Fambrough

Many individuals who aim to teach at the collegiate level think that “tenure” is one of the primary goals of those who work in academia. The security that tenure offers is indeed very desirable, and it also offers recognition by colleagues and peers that you “belong” among them. It also can serve to strengthen your own self-worth, in that your accomplishments are seen as worthwhile and have value to others.

Although tenure-track positions are very desirable, there are increasingly more non-tenure-track jobs that demand a wide range of skills from today’s professionals. These non-tenure faculty positions are nothing to shy away from, and they can be very fruitful with the right attitude and approach. This article will shed some light on ways to make a non-tenure position a good fit for you if the opportunity arises.

Some background first: I am in my 19th year at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) in a non-tenure earning (NTE) faculty position as Assistant Director of Bands and Percussion Instructor. From my understanding, this position was created only five years before I was hired, in a time when the football team had just been formed (it would have been unwise to have a tenured marching band director and drumline

instructor if football had not been successful). My contracts have been in gradually increasing terms—1 year, 2 years each (for three terms), 3 years each (for three terms), etc.—so the security aspect has certainly been improved through longevity. I have also been eligible for promotion just as a tenure-earning faculty member would be; I was hired at the Instructor level, and am now at Associate Professor, with one more rank to achieve. Many of these types of positions will be focused on the marching percussion aspect, with other duties assigned as needed and as your experience allows.

So, what steps should you take to secure your longevity in a contract-type position such as this? First and foremost is to do the absolute best job that you can in your required duties. Recruiting and retention result in growth, which is by far the most noticeable positive outcome you can achieve. From growth comes the next (and arguably most important) phase of quality. Create a positive atmosphere, one that the students talk about to other faculty members and in their student evaluations.

Beyond this, however, the most obvious answer is to go above and beyond what is expected, and there are some specific ways to approach that aspect. In terms of official faculty duties, I am only required to work in two primary

areas: teaching and service. The category of research/creative activity is not required of the NTE position at UAB, but many of the things I do fall into this category. I believe it is important to maintain an active personal commitment to research and creative activity, mainly because those are the things that made me want to teach at the university level. I would likely be doing these things anyway—performing, writing articles, and composing music—but this is the “icing on the cake” in my dossier when it is reviewed.

When considering a colleague’s file for retention, many faculty members aren’t necessarily concerned with just going above and beyond what you are asked, but they would also consider the ways in which you seek to improve both yourself and the university. Beginning in my first year, I took advantage of two different opportunities to gain additional funding for our area: grant money and library development. With grant programs at our school, I was able to build a solid inventory of electronic percussion instruments and start an Electro-Acoustic Percussion Group that met over the summer semester. I also took advantage of available funding in order to build the collection of percussion materials in our library.

As the Assistant Director of Bands,

it is also in my job description to assist wherever and whenever possible. This means being able to conduct a concert band, run a marching band rehearsal, coordinate the basketball band, and assist with honor bands and festivals as needed. This is all in addition to applied percussion, percussion ensemble, and drumline duties. Being flexible in these areas allowed me the opportunity to serve as the Interim Director of Bands a few years ago, which I now see as one of the biggest service projects I could possibly have undertaken.

OTHER VOICES

I have solicited input from others in the field who are in similar NTE or contract positions, and I'd like to offer their words here as well.

Cory Doran

Cory is an adjunct instructor of percussion at Texas A&M-Commerce and is currently the Front Ensemble coordinator and instructor for the Phantom Regiment Drum and Bugle Corps. He has served as the Interim Professor of Percussion at Kent State University and Ensemble Instructor for Matrix Indoor.

I am very fortunate to have created such a wonderful relationship with Bri-

an Zator at TAMU-C. From my time as a grad student to our now professional relationship and friendship, I've tried to do my best to serve the program and the university. I think this has been my biggest focus over the years: do good work and work thanklessly, maintain good relationships, and invest in the program. I've not specifically detailed my work ethic around keeping my position (though that is always the hope), moreso that my work ethic is considered irreplaceable. I was hired as an adjunct to fill positions that would be best served by my specific expertise. Over the past few years, I have made it a priority to develop and expand these skill sets to better serve the program as well as continue to help the program grow. If I am fully invested in the maintenance, growth, and sustainability of the program, then my position hopefully becomes irreplaceable.

It is also important to develop an inspired, professional relationship with the members of the studio. Fortunately, I have the lifestyle and ability to be present in the studio more often than a typical adjunct faculty member. There's no right or wrong way to serve your time as an adjunct, as we're only paid for the certain hours we teach. I've found a way

to structure my personal career development around my teaching schedule and office time at the university. I think this has also contributed to a positive presence as an adjunct.

If I were to give advice to a newly appointed adjunct it would be this:

Communicate with your director about his or her expectations of you. If you are able, give as much time to the development of the studio as your wallet will allow. Remember, though, that you signed up to be a teacher because you want to influence young musicians, not just collect a paycheck. It will be difficult at first to fill in the financial gaps; however, your positive relationships will help with this. Don't lose faith and don't give up. Do good work and work thanklessly, maintain good relationships, and invest in the program. "Fly the flag and drink the Kool-aid," as they say.

Joshua Watkins

Josh is Assistant Professor of percussion at the University of Trinidad and Tobago. He is the founding president of the Trinidad and Tobago PAS chapter and an active member of the PAS International Committee. Although he does not have any marching percussion duties, many of the approaches are very similar.

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The advertisement features a purple background with a gold and blue ornate chair. Eric Singer is seated in the chair, wearing a black t-shirt and blue jeans. A white drumhead with the Attack logo is visible in the foreground. The text is arranged in a hierarchy, with the name 'ERIC SINGER' in large white letters and the 'Royal' series name in a gold script font.

I broke down the job responsibilities at UTT and made sure that all of the individual elements were covered. We all have the basic tools and skills to do the job. It is the social skills that add to the complexity of the job and is beyond what is typically taught in school. Be very supportive of faculty, administration, and students. Don't silo yourself into just the percussion studio. I offered to work the door and be a stage manager

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for concerts that I was not scheduled to perform. This is the way that I met other faculty and showed them that I was serious about supporting their projects. When other faculty need help with juries, tests, etc., I do my best to accommodate them. Chances are that you will need another faculty member to help you during juries, testing, or concerts.

As the semester progresses, don't over-extend yourself. We are all a bit guilty of this. I aim for balance and try to reel it back in when I become overwhelmed. The resulting burnout and frustration that builds with trying to do everything is more disastrous than taking a step back. Our studios are filled with eager students ready to help and gain experience; all we have to do is ask. However, it is important to not overwhelm students during peak times of the semester.

I don't look at these things as exclusive to staying secure in a non-tenure track job. Rather, they are fundamentals of working well within an institution. The one piece of advice mostly relevant to non-tenure track jobs is to be comfortable with a bit of insecurity.

Andy P. Smith

Andy is Director of Percussion Studies at the University of Texas at El Paso. He directed the Middle Tennessee State University Drumline from 1997 until 2007,

winning two PASIC International College Drumline Championships. Smith taught the Crossmen Drumline in 1997 under Thom Hannum and Colin McNutt. Also under Hannum and McNutt, he was a performing member of the UMass Drumline and Star of Indiana.

As Director of Percussion Studies, I oversee the University Drumline in addition to my teaching load, service, and creative work. I view instructional time

with the drumline as invaluable; it provides opportunity to teach musicianship and professionalism, to model pedagogical techniques, and to build culture within the UTEP Percussion Community. With the members' time commitment to marching band in mind, the quality of that time spent is of critical importance. To ensure a successful experience for the members, I prioritize high-caliber instruction and music arranging.

While I do not receive load credit for my work with the drumline, I'm rewarded via the benefits to my studio, a supportive department, and positive feedback from area percussion specialists, potential recruits, and the scholastic community.

I mentor a team combining a graduate teaching assistant, student volunteers, and member leadership. Staff members gain valuable experience arranging for the group, hearing their parts performed, and receiving coaching from the band director and me. I select outside arrangers, ensuring caliber and appropriateness. Dr. Brian Tinkel contributes one exemplary show per season. I arrange select shows, pregame materials, cadences, and other materials to meet the goals of the ensemble. In terms of rehearsal time, I prioritize sectionals and game-day rehearsals, as I can make the most impact in those instances. I men-

tor the staff on their daily teaching and provide student leaders opportunity to assume ownership.

At the University of Texas at El Paso, we are currently budgeting for a dedicated drumline staff instructor to provide leadership for the team on a day-to-day basis and alleviate some of the time commitment of the percussion director. I advise any percussion professor to stay involved in the drumline, however. Your musicianship and pedagogical experience is irreplaceable, and your presence is impactful in terms of solidarity within your percussion program.

CONCLUSION

In closing, I believe it is important to make the most of your time in every way possible, regardless of tenure status. We should all strive to be enthusiastic about our work and to contribute to our school (and our profession) in ways that benefit others. Keeping your own creative outlet fresh and inspiring is important too, no matter what form it takes. Many of the "extra" activities I pursue (performing, composing, etc.) would happen regardless of whether or not it was required, and, most importantly, remember why you chose this as a career in the first place.

Gene Fambrough is Assistant Director of Bands and Associate Professor of Percussion at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). He directs the Percussion Ensemble, Steel Band, Drumline, and Electro-Acoustic ensemble and assists with all aspects of the UAB Band program. He holds degrees from the University of Georgia, East Carolina University, and the University of Alabama. [PN](#)

