



Tenure as a Factor in Choosing a Lab

Dear Labby,

How should a graduate student deal with the dilemma of wanting to join the lab of a faculty member who does not have tenure? The lab I want to join is happy and productive, and the lab head is the one faculty member in the whole department whose work, teaching, and mentoring style appeals to me. She has told me I can join the lab for my PhD, but her tenure decision year is 2014. I can't even begin to predict if she will make it (I know zilch about how this works). The word among my fellow students is simply that it's too soon to know. There is another lab I have considered, the head of which is tenured. I sort of liked their research when I did my rotation there, but it felt like a much less happy environment. What should I do?

—About to Choose

Dear About to Choose,

This is a tough decision, but you have provided Labby with some clues. The fact that you admire not only the first lab head's research but also her full persona goes a very long way. Second, it sounds like her tenure decision is by no means thought to be problematic or in trouble. Rather, it's simply not yet easy to read the tea leaves, as is often the case 24 months before a department makes a tenure recommendation. Third, even if the decision were not to grant tenure, you would be two and a half or even three years into your thesis research. Under those circumstances, the department would arrange for you to be able to finish your thesis.

Because the labs of many tenured faculty are full or have very limited student slots, students are often in the quandary you describe. But you have conveyed a sufficiently large differential between your first and second choice labs that Labby thinks you should trust your instinct. The upside outweighs the downside. ■

—Labby

Direct your questions to labby@ascb.org. Authors of questions chosen for publication may indicate whether or not they wish to be identified. Submissions may be edited for space and style.

Got Questions?

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