

When do you feel like you have ‘made it’ in academic science?

 simplyblood.org/2018/08/when-do-you-feel-like-you-have-made-it.html

ISEH Headquarters

August 2, 2018



A funny thing happened to me the other day – I got the official notice that my promotion to Associate Professor of Medicine with tenure was approved (Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis). It was all very anticlimactic, just a letter that showed up in my internal mailbox. There was no phone call from the Dean or the Chair of the Department of Medicine, no big party, no fanfare – just a signed letter staring back at me. It was a very surreal experience. This is something most of us strive for and work so hard towards and then when the moment arrives, it was all very ... meh.

But maybe that is the mindset that keeps the successful people in this field motivated to keep producing all throughout their career?

In speaking with a few senior Professor's, I was surprised to find that my sentiments were not unique, and that even people I look up to and think are extremely successful get anxiety from time to time. If anything, some of their worries are on an even bigger scale like, "will my HHMI get renewed?" So what does it take to feel comfortable in this profession – how many

grants, papers, and awards are “enough”. Every PI will have their individual metrics by which they judge their level of success.

I really feel fortunate to be in the same career stage with a group of junior investigators who are very collaborative and supportive.

So while they may seem like small steps, I think it's important that we stay positive and keep moving forward with the long-term view in focus, but at the same time not to discount the value of what's being done today. Similarly, it's not every day you receive good news like a promotion, so it is important to celebrate these accomplishments along the way with your friends and colleagues. One of the things I like about this field, and which is particularly prevalent in the ISEH community, is the feeling of we are all in this together. I really feel fortunate to be in the same career stage with a group of junior investigators who are very collaborative and supportive. Science is so big now that no single lab can do everything. The most meaningful discoveries come from the synergism of different skill sets, either locally or globally. This is something I really hope to keep going as I progress throughout my career.

Grant A. Challen, PhD

Assistant Professor
Washington University School of
Medicine
www.challenlab.com
[@challenlab](https://twitter.com/challenlab)

Sometimes it still doesn't seem real, I keep waiting for someone to tap me on the shoulder saying ... oops we made a mistake. I go to meetings and conferences and see all the amazing work being done by my colleagues, contemporaries and collaborators and it's hard not to feel overwhelmed. So much of the world's cutting edge research is being done in hematology that as a young investigator it is

really hard, actually almost impossible, to try to keep up and compete with some of the larger and more established research labs. But in a way it's also motivating – to try to find your niche in a field that is so fluid (pun intended) that dogma's are changing almost weekly. The more we know about stem cells and leukemia, the more we find out we don't actually know.



So while I am certainly grateful my promotion went through without a hitch, becoming tenured doesn't really seem to help a lot of my daily struggles, and as one senior colleague from another institute told me "it's kind of only a big deal if you don't get it". Tenure seems like more of a historical relic of the academic system rather than something tangible. In theory it means the university is committed to paying your salary if things go south and I lose all my grants, but if I don't have any grant money to pay for trainees and experiments then that doesn't really feel like it means much.

I guess I have done OK so far as an independent PI (6-years); published some papers, got a few grants; been on some organizational committees, but I still definitely do not feel like I have "made it" so to speak. I don't feel comfortable in my position, like many of us I am always worried about the next grant and the next paper. As I started to think about this some more, I wondered if I will ever feel comfortable with my level of achievement. Will I always feel like I should be doing more? But maybe that is the mindset that keeps the successful people in this field motivated to keep producing all throughout their career?

One of the weirder things I aspire to is to be on what I call the "Madonna" level. By that I mean the scientists who when you talk about their work to your colleagues, you just refer to them by the first name, and in doing that everyone knows who you are talking about. When I say "Len", "Connie", "Ross", "Peggy", or "Ben" you all probably immediately know the scientific luminaries I am referring to (Drs. Zon, Eaves, Levine, Goodell and Ebert respectively).

Like a lot of us in this field, my goal when I started down this path was to really quite simple – I want to do something that helps people. My longstanding goal is still to take observations and discoveries from the lab bench through early phase clinical trials, and turn it into something that improves the lives of people with hematological disease. But that is a very long-term view, and sometimes it's hard to see on a daily basis how the experiments you are doing at a given time are getting you closer to that goal. But I like to tell lay people when they ask me about my work and if we are getting closer to a "cure", we know more today than we knew yesterday, and we will know more tomorrow than we know today.

And on that note, I am off to the pub to celebrate my promotion with some of my colleagues!