

## Tips for success on your path to tenure

### What could possibly go wrong on the maddening 6-year interview?

By Rodney E. Rohde, PhD Posted on 17 September 2015



Professor Rodney E. Rohde is Chair of the Clinical Laboratory Science Program in the College of Health Professions at Texas State University. In 2002, I made a significant career change. After an amazing decade working in public health at the Texas Department of State Health Services as a microbiologist and molecular epidemiologist, I rejoined my alma mater, [Texas State University](#), as an assistant professor in the [Clinical Laboratory Science \(CLS\) Program](#). I had been teaching microbiology as an adjunct professor at [Austin Community College](#) for about seven years and decided to throw my hat in the ring for a CLS faculty position by way of recommendation from my former MS advisor.

I remember thinking “I’ll never get the job, but this will be great interview experience.”

And, now, as I often tell my colleagues and students, “If you apply for a job, *expect* to be offered that job.”

Well, here I sit 13 years later remembering that moment I was offered the job. I remember thinking to myself, “Do I have the academic and research skills to do the job? What does publish or perish mean? What have I done?”

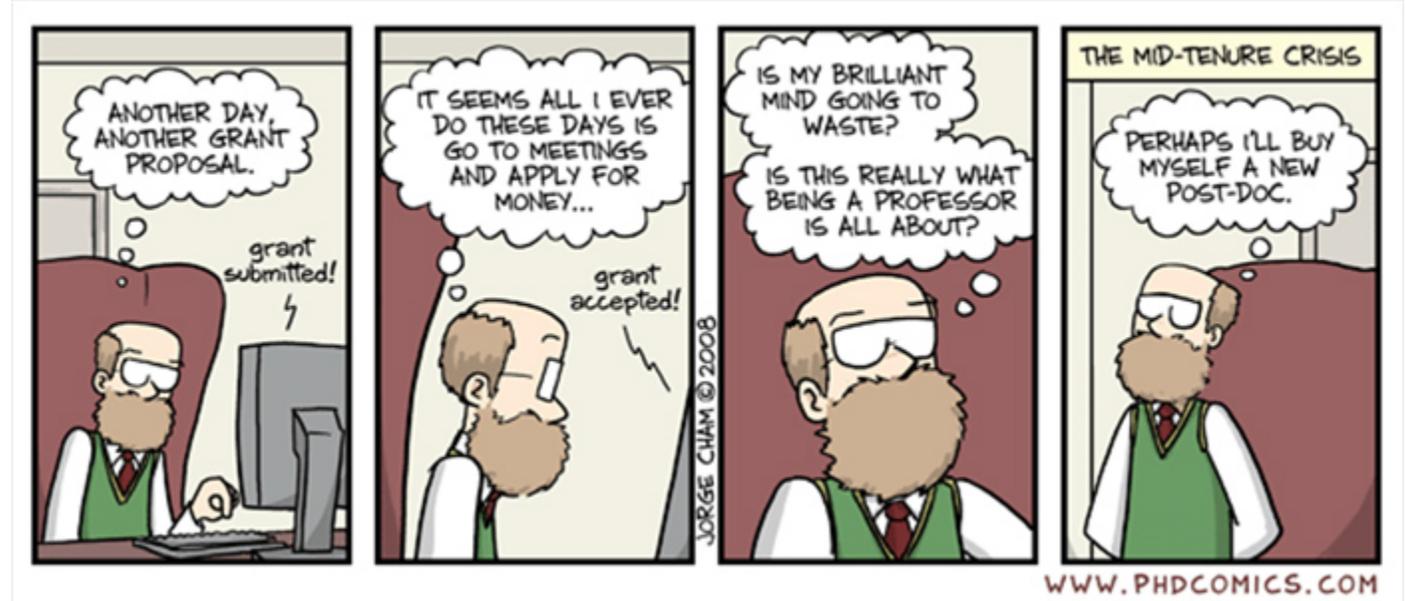
In fact, I often tell new tenure-track hires that I almost turned down this job because of the gut-wrenching anxiety I had about going on a *six-year interview that is known as tenure*.

Think about that: every year, I would have an evaluation tracking my progress towards tenure and promotion (T&P) benchmarks. These things keep a new assistant professor up at night and always “worrying and wondering” about the path to success.

When I decided to leap in to the deep end of the academic pool, I immediately started to network and talk to successful colleagues across multiple disciplines to gain an understanding as to what I needed to be doing to be successful in the T&P game. I quickly learned that the path to T&P is often a confusing journey riddled with hurdles and potholes. And often, only vague and broad guidelines are available.

One of my favorite phrases I used to read in multiple publications or policies is “quality and quantity” of research products. That’s right; tell me what that means to a public health microbiologist like me brand new to academia. Is it three, five or 10 articles to make T&P? Or does it only mean

four publications if I can get published in *Cell*, the *New England Journal of Medicine* or *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*? Should my publications be sole-authored, and if there are multiple authors, how important is it for me to be the lead author? What if I need to not publish quickly because I feel I have some type of intellectual property (IP) that needs to be kept confidential, but, in doing so I am not publishing soon enough? Do I need to get grant funding, and how much is enough?



"Piled Higher and Deeper" by Jorge Cham [www.phdcomics.com](http://www.phdcomics.com)

What about the famous three areas regarding T&P – Teaching, Scholarship and Service? Are they weighed equally? Can I be a horrible teacher if I'm a research star? Can I neglect my department, college, or university service if I teach a heavy workload or write winning grants for millions of dollars?

While contemplating these thoughts (often in the middle of the night when I was worried about my next publication letter of acceptance or rejection), I decided that I would start a diary of notes and tips of my trip down the T&P hairpin loop road – all the while under constant scrutiny at multiple levels. I did a similar [diary journal while working on my PhD](#) during my T&P employment that offered tips and secrets for those going to graduate school.

In 2008, I made tenure and promotion to associate professor and subsequently I was successful at obtaining full professor in 2012. The crazy thing about this time was I also went back to school to complete a PhD and I became a Chair of the [CLS Program](#) in 2013. Additionally, I was chosen to serve as the [Associate Dean for Research](#) in my [College of Health Professions](#). During these very busy times, I had the honor of being asked to serve my university in the [Faculty Excellence Workshops](#) which have the purpose of mentoring new faculty hires, including tenure-track faculty. It was at this time around 2011 that I brushed off my notes and tips for T&P and created my own document for these individuals.

Basically, each January I and other Associate Deans for Research attend one or more of the Faculty Excellence Workshops and lead breakout sessions with new T&P faculty. I take my tips document as a handout and I've found that so many new faculty, regardless of their academic or employment background, share the same fears and concerns that I had in 2002 and during my T&P journey. The feedback has been very gratifying. Comments are usually like "this is so helpful to hear and see actual examples of how you navigated this process, or, I can't believe you would share your documents and advice so freely."

What follows is the very document that I've edited, shared for comments, and polished each year when talking to new faculty. I hope as you read this story, you will be inclined to offer your own comments about this sometimes "behind the curtain" process of T&P.

So, let's start with the foundation of the primary three areas – teaching. Most new assistant professors have never been taught *how to be teachers*! Yes, many of us have advanced degrees, and we may have served as graduate or teaching assistants, but rarely have we had actual theory and practice in how to teach. Crazy, right? Read on.

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## Teaching your first college courses – some dos and don'ts

**1. Have you taught before? If not, find someone who can provide a syllabus template, course material examples, and advice on *how to run a classroom effectively*.** Learn to use a course delivery system that will enable you to enhance classroom instruction or offer distance learning by bringing their course materials, class discussions, assignments and quizzes to the Web. At Texas State, we use [TRACS](#), which runs on [Sakai](#) software. At ACC, we use [Blackboard](#). Find out your university course delivery system and take any workshops offered or spend time with a seasoned teacher to learn how to navigate it prior to class.

**2. Be careful of the "perfect teacher" syndrome!** It often takes two or three semesters of teaching a class before you will be satisfied with your lectures/class.

**3. Don't teach new classes with new preps each semester;** develop a small set of classes you can perfect, and stick to that set until you get tenure. Talk to your chair. *New classes reduce scholarship productivity and often have lower student evaluations. Be smart.*

**4. Be a mentor/leader/inspiration to your students,** but keep the line between professor and student clear and appropriate (Syllabus = Contract!)

**5. After your first or second time through a course, try to avoid changing textbooks, making major changes in assignments, etc., until after tenure.** Focus on perfecting your lectures and improving your student evaluations.

**6. Try to link your teaching to a research/creative scholarly productivity result** (e.g., do your professional journals have an education issue that would allow you to publish something interesting or unique about your courses; use your course preparations to provide an avenue for new publishable interpretations/analyses). Here are two examples of articles I published during my first few years that relate to teaching:

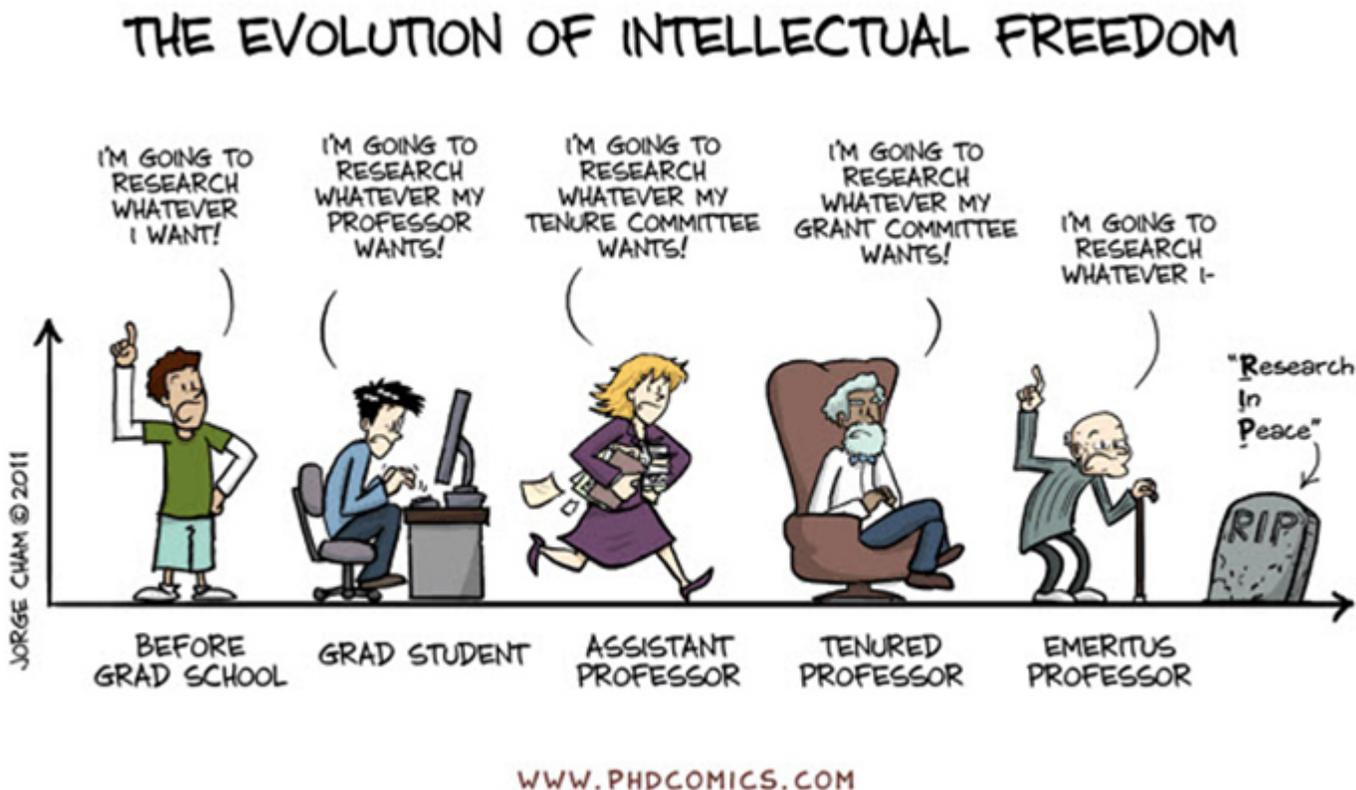
- Rohde, R.E., Falleur, D., & Kostroun, P. (Winter, 2009). "[Molecular Diagnostics CLS Course Design: Making it Real](#)," *Clinical Laboratory Science*.
- Rohde, R.E., Falleur, D., Redwine, G.D., & Patterson, T.L. (Summer 2010). "[Growing our Own: Teaching and Doing Research in CLS](#)," *Clinical Laboratory Science*.

**7. Learn what your department and college requirements are for peer evaluations and adhere to it.** (My college requires new assistant professors to have three peer class evaluations in the first year of hire, and one per year until tenured).

In my humble experience, with some exceptions, your research and scholarly productivity will be the trump card to making your journey successful. Often new faculty will hear this statement in some context: "You can be an average teacher but you better be taking care of your research productivity." Remember my prior comment about "quantity and quality?" Likewise, new faculty may also hear this comment: "You can be an amazing teacher with award winning accolades, but if you don't have a strong research profile, you will *not* make tenure." Gulp. ... Wait, what? Did you just read that correctly? Yes, you did. I've witnessed several instances of faculty being "let go" after a second or third contract year because they were not meeting research productivity even in light of solid student and peer teaching evaluations. Think about the gang on the [The Big Bang Theory](#) in regard to their ongoing anxiety-ridden, hilarious but real concerns about getting their research published in high-

level journals. Or their spirited digs at their terminal degrees. Truly, one of the reasons I went back for my PhD was so that I would gain the ever important letters behind my name that can help with grant success and other research opportunities.

## How to shine at scholarship and research productivity



"Piled Higher and Deeper" by Jorge Cham [www.phdcomics.com](http://www.phdcomics.com)

- 1. If you recently completed your dissertation/thesis, *publish* it as a book manuscript or multiple journal articles, including your university affiliation** so it clearly counts towards tenure immediately at your place of employment – not where you may have obtained your PhD; continue to mine your dissertation for publishable materials.
- 2. Establish your own research projects.** If you continue to work in the area of your doctoral research, maintain collaborative projects with your dissertation chair, but also begin to do your own collaborative research and expand your network.
- 3. Maintain the pipeline!** Research is a journey not a single destination. Always have projects you are “working on,” submitted, in review, in press, and coming to completion. Look for new projects and collaborators on and off campus. Talk to other professors about their research—you never know how new collaborations can develop.
- 4. Squeeze all the research products possible out of each project and grant proposal!** Often the background sections of proposals can be used for summary articles in peer reviewed publications. Don't waste these efforts. One of my most highly cited articles was a proposal background section.

What happens to my T&P packet?

In the attached document, I summarize the [step-by-step process of my university](#). Of course every institution is different, but I think this will help you understand the general process of your T&P materials.

**5. Don't overlook data mining with federal or state agencies, including the military.** These agencies often have tons of data that need to be analyzed and published. Establish a working relationship and offer your help with publishing because they are typically understaffed and publishing is not often a priority for them. *This may be one of my "hidden gems" regarding tips for publication.* Since I worked for a decade with DSHS and did two visiting internships with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), I became astutely aware of this opportunity. While my public health colleagues are amazing, they often are too busy chasing the next outbreak or event to publish. Establish connections with your state and federal departments of health, agriculture, education, etc., and ask to publish data sets they don't have time for. Here are some examples of [publications I coauthored with my colleagues](#).

**6. See if your institution has a grant program for faculty.** At Texas State, our Research Enhancement Program (REP) is an excellent source of seed funds for pilot projects. Ask to see a successful proposal from your college. Think in terms of "How can I build on this project to look for external funds?"

**7. Large grants are outstanding, but don't overlook smaller opportunities,** such as state contracts, professional organization grants, SBIR /STTR, corporate equipment offers (laboratory equipment, etc.), foundations, etc. to help build your research profile.

**8. If you are new and trying to establish a research record, you will have more success if you start small and build on your successes by slowly escalating the size of your awards.** Many young professors have failed to get the mega-grants and spiraled down to a failed tenure bid because they refused to start small. Establish your reputation and build on it with publications and successful grant awards. Don't overestimate your status in your academic community. Many of my early publications were case studies or projects I had established in my work with DSHS and CDC.

**9. Ask to see successful grant applications from colleagues.** Get colleagues to review your proposal drafts and learn from them. Writing a grant is not like writing a publication!

**10. Involve your students in research – undergrads and graduate students.** There are funds for incorporating this into your research agenda. Often student involvement increases the probability of getting an award, and it's a great way to build a network of future collaboration with successful students. Here are a few papers I co-authored with students:

- [Rohde, R.E. Denham, R., & Brannon, A. \(Summer, 2009\). "Methicillin Resistant \*Staphylococcus aureus\*: Nasal Carriage Rate and Characterization in a Texas University Setting," \*Clinical Laboratory Science\*.](#)
- [Garcia, S.A., McKenzie, J.F., Patterson, T & Rohde, R.E. "Snapshot Prevalence and Characterization of Staphylococci, including MRSA, in a Student Athletic Facility: An Undergraduate Research Project," \*Clinical Laboratory Science\*.](#)

**11. When rejected for publications or grants, sulk for a bit, have a cold adult beverage — then get over it.** Don't take it personally! Read the reviewers' comments carefully and learn from them. Always treat reviewers (directly or indirectly) like they have done you a big favor – *because they have*. The more critical and detailed the review, the bigger the favor. Glowing reviews on a failed proposal are useless.

**12. Rewrite and resubmit failed proposals by directly addressing the criticisms of the reviewers.** Successful proposals are often submitted two or three times before they are awarded. Do not give up.

**13. As you have time 😊, try to sit on a review panel** to learn how successful proposals are written.

**14. Likewise, find peers and mentors inside (or external) your college and department that are successful at publishing research – and, learn from them.** Offer to do the “grunt work” on a project to get on the publication.

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## Don't underestimate the importance of service

**1. Don't be a disappearing act.** It's common to hear tenured professors, chairs, deans or your upper administration tell new faculty to “not overload yourselves with service” during the first few years of your tenure track appointment. In many ways this is good, solid advice. However, *you should be collegial* in your primary department or unit environment. Think about assisting with “close to home” duties in your department or college. Remember, many of these close colleagues will be on the personnel committee of college review group that evaluates your T&P annual packet. So, don't be a disappearing act when it comes to pulling your own weight. Our provost likes to say if there are five people in your department, then try to do 1/5 of the service. I agree – and, I would personally tell new faculty to not be afraid to serve more when it makes synergistic sense for their research and networking capital.

**2. Look for committees that actually interest you.** It's OK to *volunteer* for something you might find helpful and fun, versus being assigned – especially if it intersects with research interests or puts you into collaborative research relationships. For example, I sat on the university's Animal Care and Use Committee as my college representative. Zoonotic disease is in my public health background, so the committee led to collegial efforts and networking for my research. I can't begin to tell you the benefits I gained by networking with other university researchers in the zoonotic and infectious disease area at my institution. I still take advantage of those relationships.

**3. Talk to others who can help you find committees that will not dominate your time – and avoid chairing a committee the first few years.** Chairing a committee can be a lot of work and will decrease your scholarship productivity, a very bad idea if you don't have tenure. (It will be a good idea when you begin thinking about full professor, as leadership in service is important at that time.)

**4. Keep an eye on how the university and your college view service.** There is a movement to place more value on service. This is especially true of those considering full professor. Is it important if you become president of your national or state professional organization? If not, then you may want to hold off on external service opportunities until later unless there is a direct benefit to you – like helping you publish or establish grant partners.

**5. Learn how the university works.** During your first year, read the policies and procedures of your university, Academic Affairs and your college and department. This knowledge will work to your advantage by offering you opportunities to serve on different committees.

Usually, one of the last things a faculty member is concerned about is the process of their materials moving through the confusing maze of committees, the chair or director, dean, provost, president, and finally to the university system level (e.g., the Board of Regents in the US). While, this process can be different across the academic landscape, I put together this step-by-step process that occurs at my university. Of course there can be hiccups and changes, but I think this will help you understand the general process of your T&P materials.

## 12 more things to boost your chances of tenure

**1. Find a mentor** (or several) at your university who knows how to navigate academic tenure and promotion.

**2. Promote yourself.** Don't be afraid to apply for Presidential Excellence awards in teaching, research or service; awards in your professional organizations, special student mentoring, etc. This may feel awkward, but if you don't tell your story, who will? For example, I've had multiple undergraduate Clinical Laboratory Science students that have published with me. It was the first time

this had been done in my program, so I made sure the chair, dean, provost and others knew about it. I've had undergraduate students present research projects at the state and national level and win awards – again, let others know about these [award-winning projects](#). Finally, I mentor my students to apply for competitive national scholarships, summer internships, and national fellowship. One of my students was selected as a CDC Emerging Infectious Disease (EID) Fellow from hundreds of national applications – the [first in our universities history](#). You can bet I promoted that – like I am here.

**3. Write thank you notes.** Your mom was right! People who mentor you or give you assistance always appreciate a thank you, and they are quicker to keep up that help when appreciated.

**4. Practice perseverance – keep on keeping on.** The 6-year timeline leading to tenure will happen very quickly. Continuity of research excellence is important to demonstrate and document.

**5. Get organized.** Ask to see your colleagues' tenure and promotion folders or ePortfolio ASAP and begin to “think like a tenure track professor!” Most universities will have a process for faculty to organize their documentation towards tenure and promotion. At Texas State, we use binders or a file system, but we are transitioning to an electronic portfolio system. This means you should not be afraid to ask for letters documenting your research, and you should save emails, certificates, and other supporting documents in a manner that makes sense to you and your college.

**6. Surround yourself with positive colleagues** who know how to navigate academia; don't fall into the trap of cynics, whiners or rumor-mongers.

**7. Realize that tenure/promotion is a *moving target*.** Just because a full professor in your department has barely published does not mean that is the current institutional standard. Talk to your department chair in detail and tenured colleagues generally about what they expect for tenure. *Do this informally and individually*; don't ask for an on-the-spot evaluation of your record. Talk in generalities to your departmental colleagues. Remember, each tenured professor in the Personnel Committee can vote independently, anonymously and without a need to justify their vote; if they are not willing to talk about this, don't push it.

**8. Don't be afraid to talk to your chair and dean about the culture in your college**, including the personnel committee. Keep the T&P policy nearby (Department, College, and University).

**9. Attend the T&P workshops and seminars at your university.** What better way to get to know others in the same situation? You can create lifelong friends and colleagues as your experiences – together – steel you by offering encouragement and “venting sessions” for each other. Likewise, by attending these events you can put a “name with your face” so that your provost, dean and others will know you care and are willing to learn to be successful. At Texas State, there has been a purposeful and directed attempt to help all faculty be successful. Recently, many of these [workshops and seminars were professionally videoed](#) to share with faculty that could not attend. Check to see if your university has done this, or watch our videos on these topics.

**10. It's normal to feel pressure during the T&P process; don't let it paralyze you.** Set goals, write them down, and work towards them every day. If you take care of the little things each day, the big things will work out.

**11. Strive for excellence every day.** Remember, each day you change; you either get a little better or a little worse.

**12. Practice the Four P's – Perseverance, Persistence, Passion, and Prayer!** I use this quote with my students and colleagues. I've yet to find an instance where hard work hasn't led to success. As Ann Landers use to say, “Opportunities are usually disguised as hard work, so most people don't recognize them.”

I welcome each of you to this amazing, wonderful, stressful and sometimes ridiculously busy time in your academic journey. Please don't hesitate to comment with your own helpful tips and stories. I look forward to hearing from you.

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## Elsevier Connect Contributor



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Dr. [Rodney E. Rohde](#) ( [@RodneyRohde](#)) is Professor, Research Dean and Chair of the [Clinical Laboratory Science Program](#) (CLS) in the [College of Health Professions of Texas State University](#), where he spends a great deal of time mentoring and coaching students in this sometimes mysterious and vague path. He has been recognized with teaching excellence at both Texas State and Austin Community College.

Dr. Rohde's background is in public health and clinical microbiology, and his PhD dissertation at Texas State was aligned with his clinical background: [MRSA knowledge, learning and adaptation](#). His research focuses on adult education and public health microbiology with respect to rabies virology, oral rabies wildlife vaccination, antibiotic resistant bacteria, and molecular diagnostics/biotechnology.

He has published a book on MRSA stories, over 50 research articles, book chapters and abstracts and presented at more than 100 international, national and state conferences. In 2015, Dr. Rohde received the Cardinal Health [#urEssential](#)Award as Champion of the CLS Profession, named a [Top 20 Professor of CLS](#) and received the Texas State [Mariel M. Muir Mentoring Award](#). Likewise, he was awarded the [2015](#) and the [2012 Distinguished Author Award](#) and the [2014](#) and [2007 ASCLS Scientific Research Award](#) for his work with rabies and MRSA, respectively. Learn more about his work [here](#). Dr. Rohde is the current [Texas Association for Clinical Laboratory Science \(TACLS\)](#) President and has been involved in licensure efforts in Texas since 2007.

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