

Developing a Transparent Tenure Process

Resources for Deans and Chairs
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The Tenure Review Process

One of the biggest “mysteries” for junior faculty in many departments is the tenure process. Any faculty member, if asked, is surely able to explain what tenure is and how it is achieved, but in many departments junior faculty are unable to spell out the actual process, requirements, or expectations they will face at tenure review time.

Achieving tenure involves

- Knowing the department/college definition of adequate publication or research production
- Understanding of the role of external reviewers
- Recognizing the cues given in annual and interim reviews
- Preparing a complete dossier.

Yet many junior faculty are only somewhat knowledgeable about one or more of these steps. While responsibility ultimately lies with faculty themselves, departments that want their junior faculty to succeed can do much to help them prepare for the tenure review. Transparency in the process ensures that the department has fulfilled its responsibility in the faculty promotion process.

Based on interviews conducted by Center for the Education of Women researchers as part of the University of Michigan’s ADVANCE grant, and other research projects, we can outline how many faculty perceive the tenure process and whether they consider it transparent. These questions can lead departments to review their own processes and to initiate systems that better ensure transparency in the process.

What Does Transparency Look Like?

In a transparent process, expectations are clear and open. Departments can ensure transparency by

1. Defining expectations
2. Allowing junior faculty access to evaluation committees
3. Mentoring junior faculty through the tenure process.

1) Defining expectations

- What does adequate professional product look like?
- How is the publication of a book weighted compared to the publication of a peer-reviewed article?
- Are there certain journals which are considered essential for publication success?
- Do grants need to come from specific funders?
- Are there specific weights for teaching, curriculum design, service, research, publication?
- Do faculty learn exactly what is needed for success at the tenure review?
- Are annual reviews and interim reviews concrete?
- Is feedback clear and specific?

Faculty comments about defining expectations indicate that the more specific and concrete the information about tenure requirements, the more faculty can accurately plan for their tenure review. As one assistant professor explains, “[Knowing that] an invited talk is worth ten non-invited talks...” is a piece of information that clarifies the weighting system in use by the department. Some departments invested in the success of junior faculty present this kind of clear information not only one-on-one, but also in group settings. Holding regular junior faculty lunches or meetings, with agendas such as inviting the Dean to answer questions about the tenure review process or having senior faculty discuss publication venues, can be extremely helpful.

Similarly, junior faculty want and need strong guidance through annual, and especially third year, reviews. All too often these reviews lack substance. Vague positive or negative comments leave junior faculty without a sense of the gaps in their portfolios. According to one faculty member, critical comments are needed and welcomed. “[Reviews that] say, ‘You need to improve your teaching.’” provide concrete feedback regarding tenure expectations. Another faculty member indicated regret that there was “No face-to-face meeting, which should be part of the process... I would love to get feedback....”

2) Allowing junior faculty access to evaluation committees

- Do junior faculty understand the process of evaluation in the department?
- Are they offered the chance to be members of awards committees?
- Do they have the opportunity to sit in on tenure portfolio committee meetings to learn how they operate?
- Do they know who is on their departmental evaluation committee, and are they able to talk with these people before or during the tenure review process?

Often junior faculty are assembling portfolios and preparing for a review process that they have not experienced first-hand. As faculty discuss practices that assist in understanding the tenure process, they often point to opportunities to participate in or at least observe the work of evaluation committees. They make statements such as “And every first year faculty is part of this [tenure portfolio] committee...I saw an entire portfolio,” or “...all junior faculty members serve on the P&A committee before their own packages are due to be evaluated.” What these faculty are telling us is that the best way to fully understand the requirements involved in achieving tenure is to actually hear the discussions that occur around evaluations: the weighing of various factors, the shared departmental understanding of the relative value of different publication venues, the importance of external comments, and so forth.

3) Mentoring junior faculty through the tenure process

- Is there a senior faculty member (or members) assigned to answer questions about the tenure process, offer suggestions, or simply check in with the faculty member along the way?
- Are junior faculty members encouraged to gather materials for the tenure dossier annually and to review their progress in research and publication?
- Do annual and interim reviews clearly indicate whether progress towards tenure is sufficient and/or define what needs to be done before the tenure review year?

- Is the department careful to protect junior faculty from service and committee assignments that may take time away from progress on areas, such as research, that will be more highly weighted in the tenure review?

Whether mentors "...stop by [junior faculty] offices to raise such questions as 'What are you spending time on?...Are you working on your book?'" or whether junior faculty group meetings include sessions on the tenure review process, junior faculty need to be integrated into their new departments. Mentors' responsibilities should include assisting junior faculty members to understand the tenure process within their departments as well as in the institution as a whole. Other mentoring tasks include introducing new faculty members to the institutional culture, supporting them as they develop work-life balance, and encouraging their long-term career development.

Junior faculty also stress that the mentoring relationship and its responsibilities should be clear to both the senior and the junior faculty members. Sometimes junior faculty who are told that they have a mentor find that the "mentor" does not take on the role.

Why Develop Transparency?

Not all departments need to address each of the questions listed above. However, most departments should review their processes with these questions in mind. Transparency in the tenure process benefits academic departments as well as individual faculty members. The transparent process not only enables the success of the best junior faculty, it also provides indicators to faculty unlikely to receive tenure, allowing them to consider alternative career options.

Recent work by the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) indicates that junior faculty job satisfaction is directly related to "clarity and reasonableness" of tenure practices. These aspects of campus climate may increasingly be used not only as a judge of current faculty satisfaction but also as a recruiting tool for hiring new faculty. In some cases, faculty retention can also be affected by the tenure process. Even faculty who achieve tenure may decide to leave if the experience was especially negative.

Departments and individual faculty members invest both financial and human resources in recruiting junior faculty. Transparency in the tenure process ensures that these resources have not been wasted through poor retention practices.