

Guidelines on the Evaluation of Tenure Track Faculty involved in Interdisciplinary Research in the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences

Preamble

The University of Maryland Policy & Procedures on Appointment, Promotion, and Tenure of Faculty was revised and approved on June 8, 2015 (<http://www.president.umd.edu/policies/docs/II-100A.pdf>). The language in the new policy encourages broader understandings of the scholarship and professional activities of our faculty. To quote directly from the document:

Scholarship includes original contributions to relevant disciplines, and may include newer forms such as engaged scholarship, public scholarship, entrepreneurial projects, and interdisciplinary research, regardless of the medium of publication or execution. Scholarship may also include work in fields that are not yet fully formed, such as attention to populations that have not been previously investigated or previously unexplored phenomena. For all research, scholarship, creative and/or professional activities, the work must call upon the faculty member's academic and/or professional expertise, and will be evaluated based on the unit's criteria for excellence, including: peer review, impact, and significance and/or innovation (pp.17-18).

It should first be stated that many faculty being considered for promotion in the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences (BSOS) will likely have some sort of interdisciplinary dimension to their work. Given the revolution that has occurred in communication among scholars world-wide, the ability to adopt new methods and collaborate with colleagues across the world in many different fields has never been easier. We should therefore expect promotion packages to reflect this trend and contain publications and/or conference presentations at venues not normally encountered by members of the departmental Appointments, Promotion and Tenure (APT) committee. The way to deal with these cases is to adopt an attitude of flexibility. One should judge a candidate based on the perceived excellence of what he/she has accomplished, not based on a metric derived solely from a single field or discipline. This notion of respecting flexibility when making a decision is built into the revised APT document recently approved by the campus. Moreover, those departments whose APT criteria specify and rank a discipline-specific set of journals unintentionally discourage broader approaches to scholarship. Because journal-ranking metrics are increasingly available, our departments should consider revisiting that section of their documents to allow some degree of customization – e.g., to assess the impact factor of the journals in which individual faculty candidates have published.¹

¹ It is also possible for significant scholarship to appear outside traditional journal formats, as in blogs and working papers. Individual faculty candidates can make the case and properly contextualize specific pieces for consideration.

In some cases it is recognized that a faculty member may develop a significant dimension of their research program that is clearly outside the bounds of what would normally be expected in their home department. When the research program of an Assistant Professor meets these criteria a faculty candidate can request that the chair develop an Agreement of Modified Criteria to guide APT committees in the future in their evaluative processes. This should be done by the 3rd year of the faculty member's appointment, and ideally earlier, although it could also be an outcome of the formal third-year review. Similarly, an Associate Professor may also request such an agreement, if the research agenda is moving in an interdisciplinary direction prior to review for promotion. Typically this amendment will include a discussion of important outputs in journals and conferences, and other contributions (e.g., development of new software or important data sets) in the area where the faculty member is working and discuss other norms that might be of use to an APT committee (e.g., How common it is to publish with multiple authors, and how frequently publications in the area typically appear from a given lab?).

According to the governing campus document: "Any exceptional arrangement that requires a modification of criteria for tenure and/or promotion shall be specified in a written agreement from the time of appointment up to the third-year review for untenured candidates, or at any time following the award of tenure, and shall be approved by the faculty and administrator of the first-level unit, by the Dean of the school or college, and by the Provost" (p.16). Current untenured Assistant Professors are eligible to be grandfathered in under the new guidelines.

As with all faculty development issues, mentoring is critical. For faculty who have a modified promotion agreement we recommend they have two mentors, one within the department and one outside the department who will be able to help the mentors and department assess the candidate's scholarship and also with the process of selecting appropriate external reviewers.

For faculty who have executed a modified promotion agreement and who are under consideration for tenure or promotion, the agreement should be included in materials sent to external reviewers and also become a component of the APT dossier. As usual, external reviewers should be able to appropriately comment on the candidate's expertise.

Normally, an Agreement of Modified Criteria shall contain the following elements:

- Summary of the content of the faculty member's research and why the research scope is outside the current departmental criteria.
- Clear discussion of how the criteria generally applied by the department need to be modified, including journal lists and other forms of scholarship (e.g., software, significant data base construction, and so on)
- Plan for an external mentor, and how that mentor will participate in the process

- Anything else important about the norms surrounding the interdisciplinary area (e.g., author ordering if multiple authors, value of refereed conference papers, and the like).

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