

Notes from Promotion to Professor Workshop  
October 31, 2014

Vice provost Jack Finney gave an overview of the promotion review process. When asked about requirements for specific numbers (e.g. publications, grants, graduate students), he replied that numbers are not as important as the significance and impact of the work, and vary widely by discipline. Dr. Finney recommended relying on recently promoted faculty in the department for examples of current expectations, and reading as many examples of personal statements as possible.

Assistant provost Peggy Layne presented data on time in rank for faculty promoted at Virginia Tech over the past ten years, including mean and median by college and by gender, noting that while most individuals are promoted to professor within 8 to 10 years after promotion to associate professor, some spend more time at the rank of associate, as indicated by the "long tail" on the histogram.

Kathryn Albright, Architecture + Design

Professor Albright observed that she is one of the "long tail" people, and coming to the promotion to professor workshop energized her to go up for promotion. She realized that while the categories of activities that "count" towards promotion may appear narrow, the categories are actually quite broad, and she was able to fit her activities into the categories. She started early on preparing her candidate statement, and got input from a colleague with experience on the university promotion and tenure committee. Her candidate statement focused on explaining the impact of her activities to others, why the work is valuable, and how the impact can be understood outside the discipline. She rewrote the statement several times based on input. The first two paragraphs are important to convey the message. She read the first two paragraphs of her personal statement that explain her passion for the farmers market and the architecture design studio, the impact of those initiatives on students and the community, and how they support the mission of university. It's important to show how your story fits together.

Craig Woolsey, AOE

Professor Woolsey provided an engineering perspective. To prepare for promotion to professor, he did more of what he did to get promoted to associate. He attended a workshop at the college level and trusted the advice of senior colleagues. He took a research leave to learn something new, expand skills and network. He thought strategically about service commitments and how they contributed towards promotion, and took on editing a professional journal. He also took on some service commitments that expanded his international visibility and network. He set and met personal goals, and went to his department committee when thought he was ready. One thing he did not do: He did not do anything that did not support personal career goals. He noted that a professor's value to Virginia Tech depends on external recognition.

Question: what if your department committee does not think you are ready?

Professor Woolsey noted that his department committee gave him specific feedback the first time he wanted to go up for promotion and he agreed with their input so waited a year. Jack Finney advised that the first discussion with the department committee should be before you think you are ready. A faculty member should have multiple discussions along the way. Keep in mind there is a limited pool of external reviewers, and one should use their time wisely. One or two years won't make that big a difference in a career. Professor Albright added that her dean wanted her to go up before she was ready.

Dean Alan Grant, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, talked about the composition of the university committee and how they evaluate the variety of scholarly contributions presented to them. Deans have the opportunity to brief the committee on the makeup and activities of their college; for example agency 229 funds extension activities, and faculty are located off campus at research and extension centers. Offsite faculty may not have as many grad students as onsite faculty. Difference across disciplines does not mean that criteria are different – scholarly work must have clear goals, appropriate methods, be innovative, and considered significant by peers. The candidate statement is very important to tell the story of your scholarship.

Professor Wornie Reed, Sociology, is serving his second year on the university committee, and has done many external reviews. He noted that scholarship is the most important consideration for promotion to professor. Scholarship can be defined in different ways. The committee looks at the entire record, what does the scholarship represent and what do external reviewers say about it, do the evaluations hold, are they consistent, what is the impact, measured differently in different fields. What's different from promotion to associate? A well established and sustained level of scholarship, and more sophisticated scholarship in many fields. There is an expectation of research grants in many fields, more than for assistant profs, but that varies by discipline. Some questions should be addressed at the college level.

Question: are many rejected at the university level after being approved by their department and college?

It does happen but not often. In most cases the level and impact of scholarship is not adequately supported by the documentation in the dossier.

What happens to those who are not promoted?

It is possible to be approved later after not being successful at the first consideration.

Question: can you provide examples of how to establish an international reputation?

It is not necessary to travel, but many faculty do travel internationally and establish research collaborations. Translation of a book into other languages demonstrates international reputation. Involvement with international journals can also build reputation, as can serving on committees for students in other countries.

Q: re new policy requiring review of associate professors for progress towards promotion?

Associate professors should be reviewed at least once in the three to five years after promotion to associate, starting with faculty promoted and tenured in 2012-13 (Faculty Handbook 3.4.5.3). Jack Finney will be following up with department heads to make sure this happens. The review is intended to be developmental, with the goal to make sure that progress to promotion is happening.

Q: if one is denied promotion, is there a specified time before trying again?

No, but the candidate should receive specific feedback identifying weaknesses and allow time to address those weaknesses. See also the above comment that there is a limited pool of external reviewers, and one should use their time wisely.

Q: is time in rank a consideration for promotion?

Time in rank may be discussed if scholarship appears to be "on the edge" compared to others, but in most cases it is not a factor. We present the data at these workshops to show that there are differences across colleges, by discipline, and there is a wide range of years in rank.

Q: what if a faculty member is hired as associate without tenure, then tenured without promotion? Is there an expectation of a certain number of years in rank at the institution?

There is no prescribed time period, it's a matter of discussion with the department head and dean.

Mark McNamee joined the workshop and provided the provost's perspective: The expectation at Virginia Tech is that associate professors aspire to promotion. There is no fixed timetable. We work to ensure fairness and eliminate the mystery around promotion.

Q: associate professors take on more duties, may change research direction, how does that impact promotion?

Scholarship is primary for promotion to professor, not just funding but impact and significance of the work.

Q: re gender difference in time in rank and interaction with college, discipline, could there be an expectation difference in feminized disciplines? Regarding the impact of family formation, academe has a culture of continuing to work. There is a potential for more analysis. How does the use of work life policies impact progress? In STEM disciplines, the involvement of grad students and other infrastructure may impact productivity and thus time in rank. Teaching load also varies by discipline and may have an impact. We don't have data on peer institutions. Participants would like to see gender differences by college, but that data may be complicated by small numbers. Jack acknowledges family demands are not limited to babies, but extend across the life span.

Q: how many colleges are doing similar workshops for faculty?

Liberal arts and engineering have been, we will encourage more colleges to do so.

Q: how to communicate interdisciplinary research to one's home department?

The provost has been having discussions with deans and department heads about this. Faculty members are encouraged to communicate with colleagues about what they are doing. The choice of external reviewers who can evaluate work is important. Invite speakers doing similar work to give department seminars to educate colleagues about your work.

Q: re the personal statement, the guidelines say to focus on work since the last promotion, but what about significant stuff that happened before tenure?

The personal statement is your chance to describe your body of scholarship and overall contribution to your discipline, what has led you to this point. The executive summary contains only work since the last promotion but the dossier includes everything. Craig Woolsey addressed his vision for his future career in the personal statement, how his current work builds towards future contributions. Alan Grant emphasized reading other personal statements to guide preparation. Each individual has his or her own style, but examples are helpful.

Q: at other institutions people hired as associate professor go for tenure and promotion at the same time. Peers have given examples with specific metrics of students, grants, pubs. We don't have specific metrics at Virginia Tech. That is a conversation for the candidate to have with her/his department head and dean regarding specific expectations. We have promoted and tenured some people at the same time here. Mark McNamee emphasizes the focus on significance and impact of scholarship rather than numbers.