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Development and Use of a Tool to Guide Junior Faculty in Their Progression Toward Promotion and Tenure

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Abstract

Junior faculty have multiple roles and need to participate in a variety of activities that increase their likelihood of achieving promotion and tenure. Yet, these faculty often struggle when deciding how and when to expend effort along their career trajectory. In response to the need for structured guidance when setting priorities and making decisions about time management, faculty from a school of nursing at a research university have developed and begun to use a faculty progression tool. Introduced during orientation, this tool helps junior faculty weigh the relative importance of engaging in specific activities by offering a time frame and suggestions for prioritizing and pacing efforts to accomplish critical milestones. Although primarily aimed at tenure stream faculty in a research-intensive environment, this faculty progression tool serves as a model that may be modified for environments with less focus on research. Likewise, it may provide a foundation for development of a similar tool for nontenure stream faculty.

Index words

Junior faculty; Promotion; Tenure; Faculty progression

Junior faculty who are hired by schools of nursing where the tenure system prevails face the challenge of assuming multiple, often competing, roles. Although graduate and postdoctoral programs often begin to prepare trainees for academic positions, they typically provide only limited opportunities for learning how faculty balance research, teaching, and service responsibilities. Junior faculty in the tenure stream experience a steep learning curve as they attempt to sort out where to focus their efforts. Mechanisms may be in place to ensure formal orientation to the academic institution and exposure to school-wide policies and procedures, but these are generally insufficient to address the ongoing developmental needs of junior faculty as they mature into scholars. This article describes how faculty from a department at the University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing developed and implemented a

faculty progression tool designed to help junior faculty prioritize and pace their activities as they pursue promotion and tenure.

The Need for Structured Guidance

Senior faculty and administrators in schools of nursing have a vested interest in supporting the progression of junior faculty not only to enhance their professional development but also to optimize their productivity, consistent with the mission and goals of the school and the needs of the discipline (Yordy, 2006). Recruitment of junior faculty is both costly and time intensive, particularly in light of the current and projected shortage of nursing faculty nationwide (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2005). Competition for doctorally prepared nurses is increasing among schools of nursing, in response to the vision of the professoriate articulated by (AACN, 2005), that stipulates that faculty who oversee courses at the baccalaureate level and above should hold a doctorate. Concerns about retention of promising faculty also loom large (National League for Nursing [NLN], 2006), particularly in light of the pressures imposed by the tenure clock, institutional budgets, and limited intramural and extramural research funding.

Faculty in schools of nursing have historically excelled in teaching and service to their school, community, and profession, but their record of scholarly productivity has been less than stellar (Bartels, 2007). A national survey of nursing faculty (NLN, 2002) revealed that in the preceding 5 years, more than half of the respondents had not met the most common criteria for scholarship that figure into decisions about promotion and tenure: publishing in peer-reviewed journals, submitting grant applications to national or federal funding agencies, and presenting at national meetings. Junior faculty are particularly vulnerable to this trend, often spending a disproportionate amount of their time attending to the more immediate demands of teaching, advising students, and performing committee work (Sorcinelli, 1992) and thus reducing the time available for scholarly activities such as preparing grants, conducting research, and disseminating findings.

Junior faculty may find performance expectations set forth during orientation to be daunting, if not overwhelming. Although it is essential that they understand what is expected, it is also crucial for the school to provide opportunities and resources needed to meet those expectations (Whitcomb, 2004). Faculty orientation programs are events that form the foundation for faculty development. Lasting an average of 1 to 3 days, these programs tend to focus on conveying logistical information about the curriculum and organization of the school, instructional support and library resources, and personnel policies (Morin & Ashton, 1998; Morin & Romeo, 1994). Faculty development, in contrast, is a process that begins with orientation and needs to continue over a period of several years, equipping junior faculty with the knowledge and skills to manage their time, become socialized into their many roles, cultivate relationships with colleagues and mentors (Olsen & Sorcinelli, 1992), and become acculturated to their institution (Boice, 1991).

Throughout the faculty development process, junior faculty are repeatedly apprised of the general criteria, appropriate to their academic rank, by which their performance will be evaluated (Morin & Ashton, 2004). These criteria, however, typically lack specificity regarding activities that facilitate progress toward promotion and tenure. Further, they offer little guidance regarding sequencing of activities and insufficient information about the importance of completing each activity relative to the others. Our review of the literature revealed no tools designed to help junior faculty prioritize and pace their progression activities.

Development of the Faculty Progression Tool

Since 2002, faculty from the Department of Health and Community Systems, School of Nursing, University of Pittsburgh, have convened a monthly scholarship group for peer mentoring and critique of scholarly works in progress. During the 2005–2006 academic year, several junior faculty in the tenure stream indicated that they were confused about how to proceed toward achieving the dual goals of promotion and tenure and asked for structured guidance from senior faculty. These junior faculty asked for direction about how to prioritize their activities as they simultaneously assumed the roles of educator, researcher, and citizen of their institution, profession, and the community at large. As emerging scholars, these faculty sought to advance their knowledge and skills in teaching, writing grant proposals and manuscripts, and participating on committees of the school, university, and national professional societies. They also realized that to become full contributors to their department's scholarly agenda, their personal capacity for collaboration, mentorship, and leadership in each role would need to expand over time, as depicted in Figure 1. Without clear guidance, they found themselves trying to crowd an unrealistic number of activities into the first few years of the 6-year tenure clock. They expressed keen interest in having a timetable to guide the focus of their activities and help them set priorities each year.

With input from members of the scholarship group, the coauthors (L.E.B. and L.G.) developed a two-part tool: a faculty progression grid to guide achievement of critical milestones and a series of suggestions for increasing the likelihood of success, which were drawn from the experience and observations of senior faculty. Thus, an iterative process began that spanned approximately 5 months, during which time feedback from the group informed refinement of the tool (see Figure 2).

Early milestones include meeting with the associate dean for research, publishing one's dissertation or studies conducted as a postdoctoral fellow, and obtaining intramural funding. Ongoing milestones include meeting semiannually with the department chair, obtaining extramural funding, and disseminating research findings. Each milestone has been assigned a priority rating of "important," "more important," or "most important" at different times along the early career trajectory.

The suggested behaviors for enhancing chances of success in the second part of the tool are subsumed under the headings *attain*, *delay*, *limit*, and *do*. These suggestions provide more detail about whether and when to pursue selected scholarly activities: They offer advice about how to balance activities that are important early in one's tenure trajectory with those that might be delayed. They also provide guidance about the optimal ratio of data-based presentations to data-based manuscripts and encourage early preparation of one's portfolio for promotion. Recommendations are made for ways to meet the expectation for mentoring students and other junior faculty, such as coauthoring presentations or papers and demonstrating progression from first author to senior author.

As word about development of this tool spread to others in the school, it was shared with two groups: a tenure support group of junior faculty from all departments and a multidisciplinary peer mentoring group that included nursing faculty. Members of the administrative cabinet asked about it, and both the dean's council and the appointment, reappointment, promotion, and tenure committee subsequently reviewed the document. These groups regarded the faculty progression tool as a useful guide, although they cautioned that it needed to permit flexibility in individual faculty member's plans for tenure. They suggested that we clearly identify the department chair as responsible for determining who within the department would mentor junior faculty. In addition, they advised us to add a

disclaimer indicating that achieving the milestones listed on the grid would not guarantee awarding of promotion and tenure.

Since 2006, a chair in another department has used our tool with new faculty when reviewing their progress, and several junior faculty from two other departments have used it to gauge their own progress. The tool has also been incorporated into orientation materials for new faculty, and our department chair requested that all junior faculty in the tenure stream chart their progress and bring the tool to their semiannual meeting. Recently, faculty in the nontenure stream at our school have expressed interest in developing a similar guide, and they are in the process of adapting our faculty progression tool for their use.

Perspectives on Using the Faculty Progression Tool

Several junior faculty within and outside our department have regularly used the faculty progression tool to determine how their achievements compare with the milestones on the grid. All have found the tool to be helpful, regardless of their academic preparation and where they are in the tenure stream. Whereas some of these junior faculty earned their doctorates at our university, others were trained elsewhere. Likewise, some have completed postdoctoral training at our university or elsewhere, and others have no such training. For most, their doctoral degree is in nursing, although a few are doctorally prepared in other disciplines such as medicine and information science.

The following are reflections of our junior faculty, depicting how they are using the tool and their views about its usefulness. One faculty member joined the School of Nursing, University of Pittsburgh, immediately upon completion of a doctor of philosophy (PhD) program at an institution in another region of the country. Although trained as a researcher in her doctoral program, she did not find it easy to acclimate to her faculty position at a university with very high research activity, as defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Learning (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2007). She attended the school's orientation program for new faculty, which provided general information about the school, its policies and curricula, and various research- and teaching-related resources. However, this orientation did not provide her with sufficient guidance to develop and master the multiple roles expected of tenure stream faculty. Soon thereafter, she obtained a copy of the faculty progression tool at a scholarship group meeting. In her words, she said the following:

I review my progress as a tenure-stream faculty member based on the timeline presented in the grid, and I use this tool when meeting with my department chair to discuss my progress. The grid provides a clear roadmap to identify areas where I need to improve and/or seek support from my chair. It has helped me to know what I must do and how to stay on track.

Another faculty member who completed her PhD at the University of Pittsburgh was very familiar with its setting and institutional culture. Nevertheless, she attended every session of the school's faculty orientation program and every possible workshop addressing expectations for faculty progression. She read the guidelines in the faculty handbook and thought that she knew a great deal about the process and had a good grasp of what she needed to do. After learning about the faculty progression tool at a small mentorship group meeting, she obtained a copy, used it to check where she was, and found that she was not on track. Now, she reviews the grid at least once each semester before meeting with her department chair. She reported the following:

Using this tool has really helped me see where I need to focus my time and when I need to shift my focus. Compared to the policy/procedure describing requirements

for tenure, I find the faculty progression grid much easier to use for tracking my progress and making sure I am moving in the right direction.

A third faculty member completed both a doctorate and a postdoctoral fellowship in nursing prior to joining the University of Pittsburgh. During her postdoctoral fellowship, she had published several manuscripts from her dissertation and begun to conduct a series of pilot studies, so she had already achieved some of the milestones. Nevertheless, she found the tool to be most helpful in transitioning to an academic position.

My earlier research training afforded me protected time to focus on scholarly work. As a faculty member I needed to learn how to deal with a less flexible schedule and the pervasive pressure one feels in trying to achieve tenure within the traditional time frame. I find the Faculty Progression Tool to be very helpful because it spells out discrete criteria that I use to stay focused on high priority activities. For example, the milestone to write data-based papers has provided the impetus for me to turn abstracts from scientific presentations into manuscripts. This tool has also clarified the schools' emphasis on scholarly productivity, and it has reminded me to defer getting involved in optional, time-intensive activities such as writing book chapters and NCLEX items at this point in my career.

Another member of our junior faculty is a physician and informatician who uses the grid to measure her academic progression at critical time points in her career trajectory. Specifically, she uses it when performing her annual self-evaluation or preparing her materials for midtenure review. She stated the following:

This new faculty progression tool has helped me identify my goals for the next year. By using it, I am also better able to identify the points of weakness that I need to address so that my performance is aligned with where I am expected to be.

Faculty who had been in the tenure stream for a few years when the grid was introduced quickly realized how helpful having such guidance would have been from the outset. Although responsibility for teaching, research, scholarship, and service remains constant during the quest for tenure, the grid makes clear how the timing and intensity of commitments in each of these areas need to vary from year to year. According to a faculty member who is past the midtenure review:

Non-tenured faculty often feel obligated to respond affirmatively to any and all requests for participation in school, university, and professional organization activities, particularly when senior faculty or administrators initiate those requests. The result is that everything seems equally weighted and at times activities that support promotion and tenure are relegated to a lower position. Of greatest value may be the grid's capacity to empower junior faculty in the selective use of their limited time and energy.

In summary, our faculty progression tool has been well received. These reflections from faculty suggest that the tool developed by our department's scholarship group has been invaluable in providing structure to junior faculty as they pursue promotion and tenure at the University of Pittsburgh.

Discussion

In this article, we describe the development and implementation of a two-part tool designed to provide structured guidance to junior faculty in the tenure stream as they prioritize and pace activities that are essential for promotion and tenure. Junior faculty may use the tool not only to self-monitor progress but also to use as a basis for discussion with department chairs or administrators. As expressed in the reflections of our junior faculty, early

experience with this tool suggests that it is appropriate for faculty with different levels and types of graduate and postgraduate training and those at different points in the tenure stream.

Ongoing career development is an important process for both new and experienced faculty as they strive throughout the career trajectory to balance research and other scholarly activities with teaching and service responsibilities. The challenges associated with balancing the multiple role expectations of tenure stream faculty have been described extensively in the literature, along with strategies that enhance faculty productivity (Gropper, 1998; Hodges & Poteet, 1992; Morin & Ashton, 2004; Norbeck, 1998; Smesny et al., 2007; Wineman & Kinion, 1995). One strategy that is frequently described involves mapping for new faculty those activities recommended for completion in the first 3 to 5 years of their academic appointment so as to facilitate self-assessment of progress over time (Hodges & Poteet, 1992; Morin & Ashton, 2004; Norbeck, 1998; Zenas, 1988). It has further been suggested that providing such information during new faculty orientation programs will foster a proactive approach to setting and realizing one's career development goals.

Yet, having one's eye on the big picture of career development does not necessarily translate into the ability to effectively monitor one's progress on an annual, quarterly, or monthly basis. Such monitoring may be especially difficult in the absence of a listing of specific activities to be accomplished by specific time points. In our view, the faculty progression tool described here meets an important need for structured guidance that extends beyond that typically provided during faculty orientation programs. It engages junior faculty in the process of deciding where best to direct their efforts at particular points in time, helping them sort out activities to pursue (or avoid) during the years before promotion and tenure decisions are made. Further, it provides context for focusing the work of faculty, enabling them to see how the timing and intensity of their activities may contribute to achieving critical milestones.

We contend that our faculty progression tool is unique in that it can easily be adapted to meet the goals of a diverse array of faculty, departments, and schools. Although designed for junior faculty in the tenure stream at a school of nursing in a research university, this tool could be modified to reflect the goals and timelines for career progression among three additional groups within schools of nursing: faculty not in the tenure stream, faculty with clinical practice obligations, and tenured faculty seeking promotion from associate professor to full professor. This tool might also be adapted for use by additional disciplines and in academic settings where the teaching role (rather than the research role) is more central to the mission of the school or university. Likewise, adapting the tool to address the career progression needs of nurses in clinical settings may have merit.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that our junior faculty find this tool acceptable and helpful. Yet, given that the tool has only been in use for 2 years, it is too early to determine the rate at which those who use it (or not) succeed in being promoted or tenured. Further, diligence will be required to determine the extent to which junior faculty and their department chairs actually use the tool and whether their level of adherence affects the desired outcomes of promotion and tenure. Notwithstanding the absence of objective evidence regarding the tool, its application and evaluation among additional disciplines and in other educational or clinical settings may be warranted.

The process for attaining promotion and tenure is complex and requires attention by all stakeholders (junior faculty, their department chairs, and school administrators) over an extended period. At a time when approximately half of nursing faculty in higher education are not tenured (NLN, 2002) and development and retention of promising faculty are a

priority for schools of nursing, this faculty progression tool fills an important void. By providing structure and offering practical suggestions, it may well influence how faculty spend their time as they strive toward personal and professional goals while contributing to the goals and mission of their school and discipline.

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Figure 2.
Faculty Scholar.

Appendix

Faculty Progression Grid for faculty progression toward promotion and tenure

Milestones to Achieve in Progression to Promotion and Tenure	TIMELINE FOR COMPLETION					
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
Meet at least semi-annually with your Department Chair to review progress toward reaching the following milestones, at least until your 1 st re-appointment	***	***	***	**	*	*
Attend the School of Nursing (SON) Center for Research and Evaluation (CRE) orientation and/or meet with Director of CRE individually, to learn about CRE resources	***					
Participate in a group that can provide you with peer support and mentoring, especially in grant development and manuscript writing	***	***	***	***	***	***
Meet with the Associate Dean for Scientific & International Affairs to discuss research agenda	**	*	*	*	*	*
Publish your dissertation or data from post doc studies as soon as possible	***	*	*			
Obtain internal funding for pilot/feasibility study and check appropriate web sites for deadlines	***	***	***			
Meet with the Director of the PhD Program to discuss your areas of expertise and your desire to serve on dissertation committees	*	**	***			
Mentor graduate students, become a member of a dissertation committee, and facilitate PhD students research practicum experiences	*	**	***	***	***	***
Qualify for graduate faculty status and membership on PhD Council (your Department Chair must nominate you)	*	**	***	***	***	***
Develop a publication track record (minimum of one data-based paper per year; better to strive for three publications per year)	***	***	***	***	***	***
Attend the school- and university-wide Academic Career Development (Research) series	***	***	***	***	*	*
Attend seminars focused on development of teaching skills	***	***	***	***	*	*
Become a member of a SON committee by year 2; progress to chair by year 3; become a member of a university committee after year 3 and advance to a leadership position by year 5; seek a leadership position in a national organization related to your research		**	***	***	***	***
Write a grant (R21, R01) that builds upon your pilot/feasibility study		**	***	***		
Submit an application for an R01-level grant to national organization (NIH, AHA, ADA, ACS); allow enough time for re-submissions so that you have a substantial grant by year 5		**	***	***	***	***
Assemble materials for mid-tenure review and re-appointment; at the beginning of year 1, create a file for materials related to re-appointment, and add to this over time; begin to develop your Teaching Portfolio (e.g., sample student papers, teaching philosophy)	*	**	***			
Assemble materials for tenure review: adding to those compiled for mid-tenure review and including tenure guidelines and names of people who could write letters in support of your promotion and tenure. At least 6 months before submitting materials, meet with staff in this Deans office to review the process and ensure that you are following current procedures.				**	***	***

Priority Rating Key:

* Important

** More Important

*** Most Important