

Tenure and Promotion Start with Centers for Teaching and Learning

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The tenure landscape is changing. From an Inside Higher Ed survey held in conjunction with Gallup we find, “A majority of provosts believe that junior faculty members today must meet tenure standards that have risen so rapidly that many of their senior faculty colleagues could not have met these requirements when they were up for tenure.” Defining, communicating, and meeting these new standards takes teamwork.

Administrators interested in making the tenure and promotion process more strategic, efficient and inclusive should start by engaging with their centers for teaching & learning (CTLs). Because the CTL lives at the heart of the faculty culture, an expanded role—one that develops faculty support for meeting rising tenure requirements—makes sense. Administrators and CTLs could be working smarter together, as illustrated by the following example.

When her “top-down” prescription for turning around a school on probation failed, Yolanda Gorman started listening to her gut instincts. Before knowing the nitty gritty of enacting institutional change, she sensed the need to get faculty on board, actively participating right from the start and in every aspect. From the initial steering board to the very last accreditation sub-committee, Gorman included faculty along with staff, board members and administrators. Her school’s story of transformation is instructive: Getting serious about long term, effective solutions to problems in higher education requires a coordinated effort focused on the core mission of student learning. Imagine if she included the CTL in

her journey. She might have saved herself precious time and ended up in an even better place.

Centers for teaching and learning are uniquely situated to provide the expertise and structures needed to support tenure initiatives. Tenure support involves working across divisions, programs and academic departments—exactly the kind of work centers have been doing all along. Partially as a result of being minimally staffed, centers have learned to optimize resources and coordinate with others across campus to address faculty needs. Administrators need to leverage this power of the center more.

Center personnel fill a wide array of functions and develop an amazing skill set. We consult with faculty about teaching, hold confidential mentoring sessions that range from professional and personal issues, tenure and promotion chief among them. Officially, our job description is to lead campus educational development programs. To that end, we collaborate with Information Technology, the library, the writing center, human resources, and disability support—to name a few. We also manage awards, chair taskforces, attend committee meetings, advocate for teaching and learning, teach in our departments, organize learning groups, coordinate events that include food and entertainment, and plan and run new faculty orientation.

The point I want to emphasize with that long list of job duties is this: Centers do a lot of important work on campus. The opportunity to align this work more closely to the

university's strategic mission is there waiting for administrators to realize.

Using the broad goal of a fair and supported process for tenure-track faculty moving through tenure and promotion, here is how an expanded and strategically aligned role for centers of teaching and learning can operate.

Director

To help frame ways that administrators can be more forward-thinking about broad issues like tenure and promotion, let's start with the role of the center director. Perhaps the most overlooked quasi-administrator on campus, the director has deep roots in the faculty and can draw on the right faculty resources to help pre-tenure faculty navigate the tenure system. Centers are commonly aligned within academic affairs and report to the provost. Get to know each other better—after all, we are working on the same goals and help to articulate these goals and their concomitant expectations to faculty. Keep a two-way conversation going about university issues that intersect with faculty roles and responsibilities. When tenure issues come up, the center director will probably already know about them and be a willing partner in addressing them. Set a place at the leadership table for your center's director.

Tenure Workshops, Mentors & Consultations

When viewed from the institutional lens, workshops organized by the CTL can be less a "one-and-done" inoculation and more a progressive and interesting series of discussions about tenure based on what successful candidates do. Centers can invite recently tenured faculty, deans, union officials, department chairs, tenure committee, senate chairs, and administrators to participate. Such open conversations help

diffuse some of the isolation and paranoia, and dispel campus lore that may be out of date. Through participatory engagement rather than edicts, faculty feel both informed and empowered. Administrators, at all levels, are communicating similar messages to faculty and hear firsthand faculty concerns.

Tenure topics are a big draw. Once pre-tenure candidates are there, they are more likely to schedule confidential consultations with faculty mentors who provide a perspective about tenure that contextualizes it outside a particular department or college. While these are among the most resource-intensive programs, they are what pre-tenured faculty think of when they say, "I felt supported throughout the tenure process."

Learning Communities

Learning Communities and their cousins, the more loosely structured Communities of Practice, are open to and led by faculty, professional staff and administrators to provide a space for inquiry. With minimal administration and some guidance, these voluntary communities of interest contribute to a sense of belonging and provide opportunities for new faculty to make immediate contributions to the campus culture. Because faculty are intrinsically interested in their workplace environment, the seat of their own personal/professional success, their selected subjects of inquiry frequently align to the university's goals. Purposes for joining vary from problem solving to scholarship to shared interest. The important thing is that people representing multiple perspectives are meeting regularly to share insights and learn from each other.

By supporting and co-developing learning communities with the center director, administrators have an opportunity to engage in special topics relevant to their local context and demonstrate their

commitment to growing with faculty in pursuit of common goals.

Mid Semester Focus on Teaching (MSF)

Pre-tenured faculty may focus their efforts primarily on scholarship, perceiving that grants, research and publishing are the keys to achieving tenure. Yet, these same faculty must also succeed in the classroom. When pre-tenured faculty are struggling with teaching, the question becomes, “have you tried the mid-semester focus?” Again, the CTL can leverage another powerful program that is both for faculty, by faculty. The Mid Semester Focus is a mid-semester evaluation technique that provides teachers meaningful feedback from their students regarding the learning environment in a course. The three-part process is comprised of 1) an initial discussion about the course with a trained, faculty facilitator; 2) a facilitator led student focus group; and 3) a discussion between the instructor and faculty facilitator to make sense of the subjective student data and prepare for the following conversation with students to close the evaluative loop. As with all center programming, participation is voluntary and confidential. For the trained faculty facilitators, it provides an opportunity for deep and sustained conversations about teaching with colleagues, which enhances the promotion and tenure process by impacting faculty involved in making tenure and promotion decisions. “I learn so much about teaching from facilitating” is a common response.

Additionally, since the MSF is university-wide, the disaggregated data (what students say in focus groups about how they learn) provide a nuanced understanding of teaching on campus. Such data can suggest new directions for the administrators and the center as they work collaboratively to enhance the tenure and promotion experience.

Research and Writing Groups

Writing groups are another staple for pre-tenured faculty. When administrators become involved, their “big picture” insights can help faculty learn how to focus their research and writing projects in support of larger institutional goals.

Writing groups require minimal organization or can be generously resourced depending on campus needs and means. A regular meeting time, space and a small food and coffee budget is enough to get started. When group publishing goals are met, members can be rewarded with writing retreats or prizes. Bringing experts to campus can fill a particular need—having an administrator drop in is even better. In my experience, what members value most is learning from each other, progress toward publication, and developing camaraderie over the yearlong commitment.

Book Clubs

Book clubs offered by centers of teaching and learning can create community and space for faculty, administrators and staff to interact and network. Their role in supporting the tenure process depends on the subject of the books. A book or series of readings on work/life balance; culturally responsive teaching or race and gender in higher education provide an important venue for conversation. Book talks are also an opportunity for participants to view each other more as equals with common interests and create a place for different perspectives. For administrators it can be informal setting for learning what’s on the minds of faculty they may not typically hear from.

Start at the Beginning

Administrators can work with CTLs to develop new faculty orientation that aligns

with institutional goals. However linked your tenure initiatives are, starting with New Faculty Orientation is key. Identifying and prioritizing critical content specific to tenure can be a shared responsibility with deans, associate deans, department committee chairs, senate tenure committees and administrators to help shape the orientation tenure session and potential workshop topics down the road. Collectively, review the orientation agenda and post-orientation participant survey data to ensure that the tenure message is clearly received.

But being “on message” is just the beginning. A strong presence at orientation by administrators communicates commitment to faculty—their productivity, success, satisfaction and sense of community. Faculty, in turn, respond.

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Conclusion: A Collective Purpose

Centering a tenure initiative through purposeful planning with the CTL builds capacity, leadership development and community—benefits not always evident in tenure statistics. The more faculty are involved in the university’s success, the more they feel a part of the organization. Workplace satisfaction is in turn reflected in increased retention and productivity.

Working smarter together means leveraging a relationship with the CTL in learning new ways to address campus initiatives, including but not limited to rising tenure demands. Doing so will also benefit the learning environment and keep it central to the campus mission. What faculty, administration and center staff share more than anything is an understanding of their campus culture. Let that knowledge of values and identity work toward creating a clear and supported tenure process.