



November 2, 2020

Dear Members of the Penn State Altoona Faculty Senate:

I am writing in response to the advisory and consultative report, "Impact of COVID-19 on probationary tenure-track faculty at Penn State Altoona," prepared by the Faculty Affairs Committee of the Penn State Altoona Faculty Senate and subsequently approved by the Penn State Altoona Faculty Senate at its plenary meeting on October 15, 2020. I thank the Senate and this committee for its thoughtful and measured recommendations. In the spirit of shared governance, I provide brief commentary for each point included in the advisory and consultative report below, and I look forward to working with the Penn State Altoona Senate in supporting our probationary tenure-track faculty through these challenging times. As I have often stated, the most important thing that we do at our college in order to meet our mission of teaching, research, and service is to hire, support, and tenure/promote our faculty members.

Actionable items:

1. *Release time:* I have consulted with Peter Hopsicker, our Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, and he assures me that the Academic Affairs leadership team is seeking to implement this recommendation within the context of student needs as well as discipline and program faculty resource limitations. I am confident that this recommendation, in whole or in part, can be implemented.
2. *Flexibility with internal research funding:* Corey Griffin, Associate Dean for Research, provided a response to this recommendation, which is included in your report (page 6). His response describes greater flexibility with resources and strategic communications with the Research Advisory Committee to support this recommendation. I wholly support the initiatives in his response and will follow-up with him periodically to determine if we can support research internally in other ways should additional needs arise.
3. *Administrative guidelines for evaluations:* I appreciate the challenges confronting probationary tenure-track faculty in teaching and service obligations during the pandemic. I have consulted with Peter Hopsicker, our Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. The Academic Affairs leadership team has been monitoring and distributing University-wide information regarding changes to the way teaching is being evaluated for all faculty, particularly information from the Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs, which has provided multiple suggestions for alternative forms of evaluation beyond SRTE ratings. I also note that the format of the SRTE assessment tool is changing centrally in response to the current remote learning environment. It is certainly understood that all faculty are in a different place with their teaching during this pandemic, and I provide you my assurance that those differences will not negatively affect the rating of any faculty member's teaching effectiveness as long as the faculty

member is making a good-faith effort to provide meaningful instruction. Furthermore, I certainly appreciate the challenges confronting probationary tenure-track faculty in establishing a service agenda during this largely remote work period. I again assure you that those challenges will not negatively affect the faculty member's rating as long as the faculty member is making a good-faith effort to engage in any part of the College's or University's service activities.

Reassurance and Information

1. There are no local plans to eliminate faculty lines currently held by probationary tenure-track faculty for financial reasons. Moreover, I do not anticipate that any tenure-track faculty lines will need to be eliminated.
2. I agree that the choice of whether to extend the tenure clock an additional year due to the pandemic (e.g., requesting a COVID-stay) lies solely with the faculty member.
3. I assure you that we will do everything in our power, and within University guidelines, to support probationary tenure-track faculty with access to both research and library facilities under various campus closure scenarios.
4. We will continue to provide probationary tenure-track faculty with workshops and seminars to reduce or eliminate the ambiguity in the tenure review process. Peter Hopsicker, our Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, is currently working with the Faculty Affairs Committee of the Penn State Altoona Faculty Senate to include senior faculty members in the creation and delivery of such seminars.
5. I understand that this is an extremely stressful time, and I continue to remain concerned about the mental and physical health of all of our faculty and staff. The University provides both health and financial services for any faculty member experiencing emotional anxiety and stress during these challenging times. Penn State Human Resources provides the Employee Assistance Program as a "a free, confidential employee and family resource to be used as a first line of defense for personal or work-related concerns for yourself or your family." Faculty also have the opportunity to apply to the Employee Assistance Fund (HR100) by which "an employee with exigent financial circumstances can qualify and be eligible to receive payment from the University Employee Assistance Fund to assist with a wide range of personal or family hardships." Other services are also available through Penn State Human Resources as well as our local Health and Wellness Center. I encourage any faculty member who may be in need of support of any kind to reach out to your division head, Peter Hopsicker, myself, the Employee Assistance Program, or our Human Resources office.
6. Finally, we will continue to provide timely information and updates to all faculty. Per your request, going forward we will be more targeted in communications regarding the University's activities and changes to policies and provisions pertaining to junior faculty.

Thank you for providing your recommendations. Working together, we can continue our work to meet our shared mission while also providing as much flexibility and support as possible for our faculty and staff at Penn State Altoona.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Lori".

Lori J. Bechtel-Wherry, Ph.D.
Chancellor and Dean