



Impact of COVID-19 on probationary tenure-track faculty at Penn State Altoona

Advisory and Consultative Report

**Prepared by the Faculty Affairs Committee
Penn State Altoona Faculty Senate**

Report Date: October 8, 2020

Background

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to have far-reaching consequences for the academic environment at Penn State Altoona, most notably for this discussion in the dramatic shift of faculty time and opportunity away from research and creative activities. The proximal causes for that shift include a major increase in the time needed for class preparation, including shifting teaching presentations and other materials between multiple modes; the loss of research impetus ordinarily provided by academic travel to participate in conferences and other scholarly events; the closure of libraries, archives, museums, venues for the performing arts, and research institutes; and a wide variety of amplified distractors from outside the academy. In recognition of this shifting environment, the University has provided tenure track faculty with the option of an additional year “on the tenure clock.” However, the results from a survey administered by our committee to Penn State Altoona’s 25 tenure track faculty in probationary status suggest strongly that the Altoona College needs to provide additional support for faculty in provisional status, to attempt to offset the dramatic loss of research momentum inherent in the situation.

Recommendations

Actionable items

1. *Release time*: Our committee recommends that release time in the form of teaching load reductions should be granted to junior faculty members to help them regain momentum and make up lost time regarding their research agendas. We feel that a total release of 6 contact hours for each faculty member in probationary status currently in years 1-4, and 3 contact hours for each probationary faculty member currently in years 5-6, ought to be seriously considered by the administration. (Severely impacted faculty members might warrant additional release time, to be determined in consultation with their Division Head). Our recommendation is that the release time should be used within 2 academic years (4 semesters). This release time should not be eligible for conversion to extra compensation, as it is intended specifically to address a need for additional time for research or creative activity.

Our committee understands the financial and strategic strains under which the University is currently operating. We note that the granting of release time may require senior faculty colleagues to temporarily take on less desirable teaching schedules in some cases; our hope is that, together with the current dip in enrollment, strategic scheduling, and harnessing the solidarity of senior faculty towards their junior colleagues, the overall impact to both the student population and the College's finances could be minimized.

2. *Flexibility with internal research funding:* All internal research funding at the College or Division levels, as well as the associated application processes, deadlines and extensions, should be made as flexible as possible for those in probationary status, within established University policy constraints. The Associate Dean for Research and Sponsored Programs should communicate about those processes with each of the affected faculty members on an ongoing basis. For example, this should include more openness related to spending Travel 1 and Travel 2 money (in view of current travel restrictions), such as allowing faculty to use those funds to cover costs for images of archival documents, or for help with coding documents or interviews. Our committee commends Associate Dean Griffin for his already-announced initiatives in that direction, and we would emphasize that his position outside the ordinary chain of command above these provisional faculty members makes him more approachable for this purpose.
3. *Administrative guidelines for evaluations:* Our committee recommends that the administration issue temporary revisions about how the evaluation of contributions within the *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* and the *Scholarship of Service to the University, Society, and the Profession* may be prioritized in the current situation (while of course taking into account AC23 and all other applicable University, College, and Division policies). For instance, our committee feels that SRTE ratings under current circumstances are extremely unreliable indicators of teaching effectiveness, and that committees and administrators should instead place increased emphasis on peer evaluations or other evidence of teaching effectiveness. Similarly, our committee believes it would be appropriate to place lesser emphasis on the Scholarship of Service in evaluations. The committee notes that Teaching and Service are internally assigned and controlled by the College, and do not involve any external evaluations.

Reassurance and Information

1. The administration should reassure tenure track faculty members on several points, most notably that the College has no plans to eliminate tenure track faculty lines for financial reasons; that the choice of whether to extend the tenure clock an additional year due to the pandemic lies solely with the faculty member; and by sharing the ongoing state of plans for continued faculty access to the University's research and library facilities under various campus closure scenarios.
2. Survey responses indicate that it would be worthwhile for senior faculty members to make an effort to reassure probationary faculty that the tenure review process is not as ambiguous as some may feel in this time of uncertainty, and help to clarify

requirements, for instance by reiterating that developing novel courses is not a requirement for tenure, or that candidates may provide context for key points in their dossier, including recent challenges, within their narrative statement.

3. As part of their employment benefits, faculty members have access to a variety of support services through the university. As some junior faculty members have reported emotional anxiety and stress, as well as temporarily limited financial straits, it would be helpful if HR could provide specific information as to what health and financial services are available in this situation to provide relief.
4. It may be helpful for Strategic Communications in collaboration with Academic Affairs to compile a more targeted newsletter of internal communications regarding the university's activities and changes to policies and provisions pertaining to junior faculty. Amidst the "flood" of general communications it can be difficult to identify those that may matter most to a particular group, especially for those who are relatively new as Penn State faculty members. Survey responses indicate that updates regarding COVID impacts on research policies and infrastructure and matters relating to tenure and promotion are of particular interest to this group.

Appendix: Synopsis of the Survey

At the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester, our committee administered an anonymous survey via Qualtrics to all 25 probationary faculty members at Penn State Altoona with the following four open-ended questions:

1. If you wish to identify yourself and allow the committee to share your answers in your name with local college administrators, please write your name below.
2. Has the COVID pandemic been affecting your professional growth and progress towards earning tenure, in particular your research or creative pursuits? If so, please briefly describe in which way your work has been affected.
3. Besides the University-wide accommodation of extending the tenure clock by one year as described under <https://www.vpfa.psu.edu/files/2020/04/Guidance-Extension-of-the-Probationary-Period-Due-to-COVID-19-Updated-04.23.20.pdf> and <https://www.vpfa.psu.edu/files/2020/04/FAQs-Extension-of-the-Probationary-Period-Due-to-COVID-19-Updated-04.23.20.pdf> what additional methods of support would you most like to see from the Altoona College? When answering this question, please consider both the present situation, as well as when restrictions from the pandemic may eventually ease.
4. Any additional comments?

Our committee received 17 responses. While 1 response indicated the candidate felt well-supported to deal with pandemic-related changes, the remaining 16 indicated various levels of negative impacts on their professional growth and progress toward tenure. 10 faculty members

wished to stay anonymous (Question 1); to protect their confidentiality, our committee is not releasing any names as part of this document. We encourage the other 7 faculty members to reach out directly to their Division Heads or the college administration if they wish to follow up on this report.

Major themes in the survey responses regarding the impact of the pandemic

- *Strain on time*: The strain on time was brought up the most. Faculty members feel strongly pressed for time, especially due to the present prioritization of teaching and the adaptation of pedagogical methods to online or hybrid models of instruction and assessment.
- *Cancellations of events and closures of institutions*: Faculty members report that they have been affected by the inability to visit other academic institutions and conferences, hence restricting their opportunities to network with and seek guidance from more senior members of their research area, to access necessary sources, or to present their work.
- *Restrictions on access and research methodology*: Due to restrictions on access to facilities and libraries, as well as restrictions on research methodology (such as in human subject research, or the travel moratorium for data collection or for sourcing purposes), faculty members report that both individual and collaborative research projects have been halted entirely, or have been severely impacted with long-term consequences on productivity and momentum.
- *Delays in measurable outcomes*: Delays in research publication, in part driven by a slower pace for referees challenged by their own tighter time, as well as the postponement of scientific events, lead to delays of and less opportunities for the accumulation of measurable research outcomes for already completed research projects.
- *Strain on emotional and financial well-being*: Faculty members report pandemic-related stress due to financial uncertainty, economic cutbacks, the transition to working at home, the loss of personal communications with peers inside and outside their discipline, and strains on their emotional well-being.

Wants and needs articulated by faculty in their survey responses

- *Release time*: Faculty members suggest release time as one of the most effective ways to help them regain traction in their research program.
- *Flexibility with internal research support*: Faculty desire to have increased flexibility with the available internal budgets for research and travel support.
- *Evaluation guidelines; job and financial security*: Faculty members express concerns about their evaluations for promotion and tenure, as well as their job security, and are looking for clarity and reassurance.
- *Planning and communication*: Faculty members express the desire for guidance and communication, as well as a desire for a stable framework for being able to plan research projects in view of the possibility of sudden policy changes and closure scenarios caused by the pandemic.

Respectfully submitted by:
2020-21 Faculty Affairs Committee
Penn State Altoona Faculty Senate

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Email by Associate Dean Corey Griffin in response to this report (October 8, 2020)

Greetings colleagues,

Thank you for your report and surveying the tenure-track faculty to assess their concerns and needs. From my office, all deadlines for internal grants from 2019-20 have already been extended until at least June 30, 2021, and I am open to extending the deadlines further where needed. I also offered an additional internal grant opportunity in late April 2020 to support faculty needs for remote research and creative activities (as well as teaching). Two tenure-track faculty took advantage of this opportunity to support their research agendas – one using the funds to purchase software that allowed them to move in-person human subject research to a remote setting and the other to attend training in new statistical techniques and software that will allow them to publish articles using existing data sets. I could offer another opportunity like this again if needed.

I have been in conversations with the Research Advisory Committee (RAC) about how best to be more flexible with internal grants and travel funding given the pandemic. Our first goal is to increase the use of existing funding sources this year given the understandably low number of applications for the August deadline. For example, if there is a need for research and creative activities – such as “images of archival documents, or for help with coding documents or interviews” mentioned in the committee’s report – all full-time faculty are invited to apply for a RDG or SRG to cover the costs of these types of activities during the Nov 1 deadline. I can make this more clear in my communications, and if necessary funds normally dedicated for travel can be used to support additional RDG and SRG awards. Tenure-track (and all full-time faculty) are encouraged to reach out to me if they have additional or last minute research or creative activity needs that our internal grant cycle cannot accommodate. I am also happy to send an e-mail just to tenure-track faculty to explain these opportunities in more detail.

Depending on what happens with the number of applications for the Nov 1 deadline, the RAC has already started conversations about offering additional internal grant opportunities during the Spring term. We all want to ensure that our tenure-track faculty (and other faculty approaching promotion) have flexible opportunities to support their continued progress on their research and creative activity agendas. My office will do what it can to provide this support.

Thank you again for your efforts, and please reach out either to me directly or through Mark – the senate’s representative on the RAC – to provide more feedback and suggestions.

Take care,
Corey

Corey Griffin
Associate Dean for Research
Associate Professor of Architecture