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“We are One Penn State”: Reforming Policy to Better Support Non-Tenure-Track Faculty at Penn State

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From the Delphi Project database of

Example Best Practices to Support Non-Tenure-Track Faculty

- ✓ Reclassification
- ✓ Multi-Year Contracts
- ✓ Promotion and Evaluation
- ✓ Professional Development

“We are one Penn State,” the institution’s rallying cry, not only symbolizes the connectedness of their 24 different campuses*, but it also symbolizes their governance structure and desire to honor the hard work of non-tenure track faculty (NTTF). For years, Penn State faculty watched the number of NTTF in their ranks increase, to the point at which the majority of faculty teaching across campuses were fixed-term. In 2015, their large, active and influential Faculty Senate made up of faculty across all campuses and ranks answered this alarming wake-up call by reforming the HR21 policy (now known as AC21) and altering the policy to better support NTTF across all Penn State campuses. HR21 was Penn State’s policy governing faculty appointments. It explicitly laid out the difference between an instructor and a tenure-track or tenured professor and detailed the promotion process. This reform occurred in three phases in an attempt to recognize and reward NTTF as the dedicated professionals they are.

Expanding the NTTF Promotion and Evaluation Process

The first phase created a framework for promoting NTTF. This framework mirrored the tenure track promotion system and offered the opportunity for a more meaningful, robust review process for NTTF. This more robust review process included, for the first time, a third tier for promotion, which allows NTTF tiers of rank much like the tenure track faculty (i.e., assistant, associate, and full professor). Crucially, NTTF were to elect and serve on their own promotion committees, allowing them to simultaneously participate in more service opportunities and hear about and assess the work of NTTF going for promotion. It also helps NTTF to have their NTTF peers on their promotion committees since they understand what it means to be an NTTF member at the institution. Participation in these committees also provide NTTF the chance to collaborate with other NTTF in different departments or campuses, reinvigorating the “We are one Penn State” rallying cry. 184 NTTF were promoted before the AC21 policy was in effect for a full year, and an additional 204 were promoted during the typing of the proposal that ultimately won the Delphi Award. All promotions come with merit raises.

**Penn State, which includes Commonwealth Campuses across Pennsylvania and its online World Campus, identifies itself ‘one University, geographically dispersed’ as part of its message of unity. In most states this structure is referred to as a system or multi-campus institution.*



Reclassifying Non-Tenure Track Faculty

The next phase involved a new retitling system for NTTF to reflect any promotion they received. The consensus of the Faculty Senate was to extrapolate the titles from the tenure track system and apply them to NTTF as well. NTTF were given titles of assistant, associate and full professor depending on their roles within the institution. For example, if a faculty member on the non-tenure track had teaching as a primary responsibility, they were given the title of assistant teaching professor. Under this title system, faculty members with large teaching loads and terminal degrees have the opportunity to be promoted from assistant teaching professor to associate teaching professor to teaching professor. The Faculty Senate heard from many NTTF in the sciences who indicated that the new titles would serve them better when applying for external research grants. These new titles go beyond simple changes, it signals the importance of the teaching, research, and practice being done at the non-tenure track level. The reclassified titles give NTTF more personal value and a spike in motivation to continue doing the work needed to improve student learning and success. What these new titles also do is get NTTF interested in the promotion process and its ability to encourage professional growth. Additionally, it is important to note that the shift in title does not mean added responsibilities, it simply reflects the faculty members commitment to their responsibility within the institution.

“With this change, after the first year of 184 promotions in 2017-18, 150 professors were given multi-year contracts and 115 of these have contracts of three years or more.”

Multi-Year Contracts

The last phase aimed to establish multi-year contracts. The financial implications of this change created contention. The initial recommendation was to offer multi-year contracts based on rank in the new tier system—for instance, three-year contracts for faculty at the second tier and five-year contracts for faculty at the top tier. University administration would not initially sign off on this recommendation due to the belief that mandated multi-year contracts were too restrictive and that deans and chancellors needed more flexibility. However, a system was negotiated where multi-year contracts would become the new norm at Penn State. This new norm will properly compensate non-tenure-track faculty members for their hard, valuable work and commitment to the university. With this change, after the first year of 184 promotions in 2017-18, 150 professors were given multi-year contracts and 115 of these have contracts of three years or more.

Commitments to Developing Non-Tenure Track Faculty

Penn State is committed to professionally developing the non-tenure-track scholarly community across its 24 campuses. They see value in peer to peer initiatives and have also committed to producing teaching and learning scholarship.

Peer to Peer Initiatives

Innovative Teaching at Penn State (ITAP) Lunch Series. The ITAP Lunch Series is a series of talks that highlight the innovative teaching happening at Penn State across disciplines, departments, and campuses. It aims to build a community of faculty, staff and administrators interested in improving student learning. Topics offered in the last year included “How improv theatre can improve your classroom” and “Combining the tools of research/scholarship with the practice of teaching to improve your teaching.”

Faculty Learning Communities. Housed in the Teaching and Learning with Technology Center, Faculty Learning Communities aim to transform teaching and learning in a positive, enduring way. These small communities are formed around specific topics. Faculty Learning Community leaders are given a \$500 stipend and another \$500 for resources and meetings. They happen on various campuses and people can participate at other campuses. Topics include the following: Mentoring Undergraduate Student Researchers and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Chemistry.

Teaching and Learning Scholarship

Penn State has committed to increasing their collective output of teaching and learning scholarship by 25% over the next two years. This is in response to a survey sent out to full time NTTF where almost 79% of respondents identified using scholarly research on teaching and learning to improve their own classes. This signals a significant use of teaching and learning scholarship by professors and situates Penn State in a place where they can produce teaching and learning scholarship given the policy change. They also plan to create a new, permanent research faculty position dedicated to supporting faculty in doing teaching and learning scholarship work as well as conducting large scale teaching and learning scholarship projects for the university.

Learn more about Penn State’s efforts to support all faculty on the university’s Academic Policies webpage at <https://policy.psu.edu/policies/ac21>.

Visit The Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success for more example practices and a wide range of resources and toolkits to better support faculty off the tenure track at pullias.usc.edu/delphi.

