Aligning Promotion and Tenure Policies to Promote Interdisciplinary Research

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I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Project Challenge:
A member institution approached the Council with the following questions regarding promotion and tenure for interdisciplinary faculty:

- What policies have institutions implemented to address promotion and tenure for faculty with interdisciplinary research interests?
- Does non-residence in a single department hurt tenure bids for faculty with interdisciplinary interests? How do institutions create infrastructure to support interdisciplinary work?
- How do institutions assess the productivity of interdisciplinary faculty?
- How have institutions realigned tenure criteria to promote interdisciplinary work?
- What are some innovative practices regarding interdisciplinary promotion and tenure?

Promoting research that involves collaboration across different departments has become a top priority at an increasing number of research universities. Many of the most pressing scientific, technological, and social issues require such an approach, and funding agencies are often eager to support large-scale, cross-disciplinary collaborations.

While the university has an interest in hiring, promoting, and tenuring faculty who excel in this type of research, individual departments do not always share this interest. Departments’ interest in upholding disciplinary standards through the tenure process often conflicts with the institution’s desire to promote multi- or cross-disciplinary research. More specifically:

- Departments may see interdisciplinary research as lower quality because it fails to meet traditional metrics of disciplinary excellence, such as publication in the discipline’s most prestigious journals.
- The more collaborative nature of interdisciplinary work may make it more difficult for a candidate to demonstrate that he or she has independently led a major piece of research.
- Members of the tenure committee may feel unqualified to evaluate work that falls partially outside of their discipline, and they may struggle to judge the weight that should be given to experts from outside their field who support the candidate.
- Depending on how credit for research funding is allocated, an interdisciplinary researcher may be seen as diverting funds away from the department to a center, institute, or another department on campus.
- Ultimately, a tenure process that appears to be more onerous for interdisciplinary faculty (e.g., requiring two departments to vote for tenure rather than just one) will discourage junior faculty from engaging in the type of research the institution hopes to promote.

This brief reviews how 11 research universities have attempted to overcome these challenges.
Research Parameters:
- The Council reached out to vice provosts of faculty affairs at large research universities.

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<th>Institution</th>
<th>Geographic Location</th>
<th>Carnegie Classification</th>
<th>Approximate Enrollment (Total/Undergraduate) Fall 2008</th>
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Source: National Center for Education Statistics
II. EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

Key Observations:

- None of the institutions contacted have developed a separate set of policies that apply only to interdisciplinary candidates for tenure. Contacts suggest that an overly bureaucratic approach is not likely to result in better tenure decisions and may have unintentional adverse effects.

- Creating a broader support infrastructure for interdisciplinary research can improve the promotion and tenure process for interdisciplinary faculty without the need for major tenure policy changes. Establishing institutes and centers, formalizing processes for joint appointments, creating interdisciplinary departments, and reorienting hiring practices to align with institution-led “clusters” all facilitate a more accepting tenure review processes without explicitly changing the guidelines.

- Establishing clear expectations in memoranda of understanding upfront ensures that faculty know their responsibilities and how their work will be assessed in the promotion and tenure process. This can significantly reduce institutional exposure to difficult battles over promotion and tenure.

- A number of institutions have adjusted the format and presentation of the tenure dossier to better convey the strengths of interdisciplinary faculty. While the overall process remains the same, an interdisciplinary faculty member’s CV may require a greater narrative component to help more disciplinary-focused members of the department understand the significance of his or her contributions.

- Though most contact institutions are trying to move away from an exclusive emphasis on traditional disciplinary journals in the tenure process, few institutions have formalized that preference in the faculty handbook. Only one contact institution has expressly forbidden tenure review committees from downgrading a candidate for not publishing in discipline-specific journals. Still, institutions remain committed to rigorous scholarship in high-caliber journals as a metric for reviewing tenure candidacies.

- No contacts express support for granting tenure without single- or primary-author publications, despite the increasing prominence of multi-author publications and the need for large, multifaceted research teams to address intractable research questions. Contacts at one institution recognize the countervailing priorities but assert that for faculty to earn tenure, they must show their independence as thinkers and their ability to lead a project. Although for large-scale research, leadership over one subsection or aspect of a project may suffice.

- Strong advocates for interdisciplinary research from outside the department (senior administrators, deans, center directors, respected faculty from other departments and other institutions) can support junior faculty both on the path to tenure and in front of the tenure committee. Deans and prominent faculty have enormous influence over the credibility afforded younger faculty members. By supporting both the interdisciplinary work of junior faculty members and advocating on their behalf within departments and on tenure committees, these faculty can nudge departments in the direction of greater support for interdisciplinary research.

- The administration can provide benefits to compensate the department for the “cost” of tenuring a faculty member who will spend a portion of his or her time working outside the discipline. Special funds for interdisciplinary hires or research bring new resources to the department that can only be accessed by participating in interdisciplinary initiatives.
III. INFRASTRUCTURE FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY ADVANCEMENT

Overview

Though policies across institutions vary with respect to how well they support interdisciplinary activity, no institutions suggest that interdisciplinary faculty require a different set of rules in order to ensure their productivity and protection. Contacts indicate that policies are implemented institution-wide and either provide support for, or neglect to make accommodation for, interdisciplinary work.

Contacts at University C explain the challenges confronted as institutions consider whether to revise promotion and tenure policies to better support interdisciplinary work. Whereas clear communication with faculty regarding expectations is crucial to supporting interdisciplinary activity, contacts suggest that they fear being overly bureaucratic. With interdisciplinary research especially—where variance among promotion and tenure cases is high—creation of new policies may not alleviate the problems, instead replacing one set of strict guidelines with another. Contacts at the University H expressed this sentiment, noting that it is often easier to effect change on an ad hoc basis while working around official policies. However, to make no assurances to interdisciplinary faculty may have a chilling effect on their inclination to pursue innovative work.

Fostering Interdisciplinary Research

Institutions have established a variety of institutional units and practices to help facilitate robust interdisciplinary research activity and to ameliorate difficulties that stem from housing interdisciplinary work in traditional disciplines.

Both University I and University D promote joint faculty hiring by two departments as one mode of facilitating interdisciplinary activity. When faculty are officially hired between departments, they gain greater latitude to address intersections between the two departments. Faculty must be aware that joint appointments can have unforeseen administrative difficulties. They may feel the pull of two different units demanding their time and service capacity. Clear delineation of expectations—as explained in greater detail below—can remedy this problem effectively.

Contacts at University B observe that this practice may backfire, forcing two departments to assent to interdisciplinary faculty tenure bids.

Creating single departmental units inherently geared toward interdisciplinary work serves as another method for encouraging such research activity. University J and University I both maintain departmental units built for multi- and inter-disciplinary research and teaching. Some examples of these units are: international and area studies, African-American studies, East Asian studies, American studies, social medicine, religious studies and women and gender studies. When faculty are grouped in single units that incorporate a plurality of research interests and approaches, these departments are far more likely to encourage and promote interdisciplinary research activity. With tenure granted through these departments, young faculty may not feel that their interests and departmental demands are at cross purposes.
Across institutions, research centers and institutes serve as the most common facilitators of interdisciplinary research. Institutions establish relationships between institutes and departments in different ways:

- Many institutions jointly appoint faculty between a department and an institute. The institute pays a portion of the faculty member’s salary. Promotion and tenure decisions are handled through the home department.
- **University H** maintains a center for neuroscience that has developed its own PhD program. This PhD program allows the center to function more like an individual department while preserving its interdisciplinary inclination. At **University D**, some researchers work full time in institutes. Though these faculty receive tenure in departments, the Vice President for Research serves as these faculty members’ dean, with oversight of tenure.
- At University D, the provost takes money off the top of college budgets to support institutes. The institutes are empowered to co-fund faculty positions with college deans. University D creates an internally competitive process to determine which departments will earn co-funding from the center. Departments bid on co-funded positions with proposals for innovative interdisciplinary work. By providing financial flexibility for college deans and department chairs through co-funding, these institutes help realign incentives to earn board-based support for interdisciplinary work.

**University K** has begun hiring faculty in relation to cluster topics—areas defined by the institution as priorities for institutional research. Colleges have several cluster areas defined and direct research objectives and candidate searches in those directions. Contacts at University K argue that they have attracted higher caliber candidates with cluster focus, and they have even attracted senior-level, productive faculty who were not looking to move institutions. These faculty were intrigued by the philosophy of cluster hiring—which inherently promotes interdisciplinary thinking by focusing many departments around common research interests.

Though cluster hiring has been a great success in some colleges at University K, it has yielded minimal success in others. Contacts suggest that the commitment of college deans to cluster hiring—and their relative success in pushing back against resistance without retrenching to strict disciplinary hires—has an immense impact on whether colleges reap rewards from the transition to cluster hiring.

### Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs)

Across institutions, contacts cite MOUs as critical to executing the types of joint appointments and partnerships that incubate interdisciplinary work. When faculty are jointly appointed, these MOUs establish protocols for the division of responsibilities, clear guidelines about where faculty are to direct their energies, and departmental expectations in advance of tenure. Contacts at **University E** note that without explicit MOUs, departments and colleges could face messy promotion and tenure battles due to incongruous understandings of faculty expectations.
IV. PRESENTATION AND EVALUATION OF TENURE DOSSIERS

Overview

As noted above, institutions have not established special guidelines for interdisciplinary faculty; however, some institutions have tweaked tenure review policies and processes institution-wide in order to be more considerate of faculty interdisciplinarity.

Candidate Narrative

Across institutions, tenure candidates have the opportunity to present their research accomplishments to the tenure review committee and explain the substance and context of their research activity in a statement that the tenure committee reviews with other materials. At University I, the administration has adjusted the way a candidate’s accomplishments are presented. Beyond a mere review of the candidate’s curriculum vitae, the new candidate statement framework solicits information on who the candidate is as a researcher and educator, how the candidate’s work impacted the discipline, and where the candidate’s scholarly creative interests are moving forward. This presents candidates with an opportunity to explain their activities instead of leaving it to committee members to interpret the contents of the dossier. Similarly, contacts at University E indicate that candidates must supplement their curriculum vitae with a broader statement that contextualizes their work and its impact.

Outside Experts’ Review

As with traditional disciplines, outside experts must weigh in on the value and consequence of candidates’ research. Whereas this process may be straightforward in traditional disciplines, tenure reviews for interdisciplinary researchers pose a greater challenge. Contacts at University I stress the importance of finding the right experts. Because a given area of interdisciplinary research is often familiar to a much smaller subset of researchers, selecting the most appropriate outside reviewers is both challenging and crucial. Contacts at University B note the importance of the outside reviewers for interdisciplinary research as well. Because interdisciplinary work is also more often collaborative than traditional research, outside experts must be able to articulate the value added by a tenure candidate to a larger project. This is necessary to understand that part of the dossier consisting of collaborative work. Their expertise helps the committee assess whether the candidate possesses the requisite originality, innovation, and independence to merit tenure.

Across institutions, contacts note that the tenure candidate recommends some of these expert reviewers, while the dean or department chair selects the rest. This collaborative process is necessary to ensure that the candidate has a fair review: the candidate can nominate people he or she feels will speak to the quality of the work, while the dean’s and department chair’s suggestions make certain that the candidate is not hand-selecting the panel that will assess his or her scholarship.

Directors’ Letter Submission

Contacts at University C, the University G, and other institutions note the integral role institute and center directors play in the tenure review process for interdisciplinary faculty. Although at most universities institutes and centers do not grant tenure, their role as a hub of interdisciplinary research places directors in a strong position to comment on the relative merits of tenure candidates affiliated with an institute or center.
IV. PRESENTATION AND EVALUATION OF TENURE DOSSIERS (CONT.)

Makeup of Tenure Review Committee

As noted above, one of the potential difficulties with cross-departmental joint appointments is how institutions structure the tenure review process for these faculty members. At the University H and University B, these faculty members go through a more complicated, drawn out review process because each department must assent to tenure. Conversely, at University K, faculty members have stipulated tenure homes which are responsible for reviewing their cases. Any information about interdisciplinary work is included in the dossier either in the candidate’s statement or in letters of support. University D occupies a middle ground, with a formalized process by which the secondary department submits materials to the primary department with respect to the candidate’s tenure bid.
V. EXPECTATIONS FOR SECURING TENURE

Do Institutions Require Faculty to Publish in Specific Disciplinary Journals?

Contacts observe that a traditional point of contention during interdisciplinary faculty tenure reviews has been over the types of journals in which these faculty members publish. Whereas prestigious journals in a given field are often conservative, newer journals more accepting of interdisciplinary scholarship lack the caché some review committees seek in tenure decisions. Contact institutions describe different approaches to this problem.

Traditional Publishing First

At University H, contacts explain that faculty members are urged to publish traditionally at first and to push the envelope later. They suggest that it is perhaps not a bad thing for faculty to establish credentials as a top-flight traditional researcher before looking toward interdisciplinary research opportunities. This progression through traditional scholarship first can increase the import of the later interdisciplinary work done by researchers.

Contacts at some institutions question whether this process encourages researchers to be creative and tackle large problems instead of jumping through hoops to secure tenure before pursuing their strongest interests.

Detailed Journal Descriptions

At University K, the tenure dossier includes detailed descriptions of journals in which candidates have published and explanations of their value either in the discipline or in interdisciplinary circles. These descriptions create a more vivid picture of the caliber of work done by interdisciplinary candidates, and—along with a narrative statement and letters from institute directors—can go a long way toward helping interdisciplinary faculty receive a thorough and equitable review.

At the University G, the tenure review committee considers interdisciplinary journals based on their stature within that community of scholars, so as to reduce the adverse impact on interdisciplinary faculty of publishing outside the traditional top journals in a given field.

Eliminating Requirement to Publish in Specific Journals

Among contact institutions, only University J rewrote policy to support interdisciplinary faculty members who publish outside the traditional disciplinary journals. While scholarship is still assessed on its merits and publishing in top journals is important, faculty are free to publish in journals completely outside their field without penalty. For instance, if a historian publishes on early 20th century film in a film journal, this would count toward that candidate’s record during the tenure review process. Contacts at University J suggest that explicit policy change is the only way to ensure that interdisciplinary faculty members receive fair treatment. Review committees must explain the rationale for their tenure decisions. If they cite publishing outside top disciplinary journals as a demerit on a candidate’s record, the official policy change makes appeals of the committee’s decision easier.

“If you don’t protect faculty, word on the street will be that interdisciplinary work is not supported.”

Vice Provost, Instruction
University J
Though contacts largely agree that the nature of interdisciplinary research does not fit neatly with the traditional tenure process, no contacts are prepared to eschew the tenure requirement for scholars to publish independently or as primary authors. Though interdisciplinary scholarship is often highly collaborative, researchers must still show institutions that they possess the originality of thought to lead an inquiry from its nascent stages through publishing findings.

University K made an institutional decision over the last ten years to pursue large grants requiring large research teams, instead of smaller grants that individual investigators could attain on their own. University K decided this in an effort to position itself strategically as a top research institution. Despite this institutional focus on large-scale, multi-investigator grants, contacts at University K still say that tenure bids must demonstrate single- or primary-author publications—though contacts suggest greater flexibility. As an example, they note that tenure candidates could lead one aspect of a larger project. Successful tenure candidates can still show research leadership even when an entire institution redirects its focus toward large, multi-disciplinary, team-based research.

“*We have not reached the point as a university where a faculty member can earn tenure with only collaborative research projects.*”

Vice Provost, Interdisciplinary Studies
University C
VI. ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Faculty Champions

At University C, senior faculty members play a crucial role in guiding interdisciplinary junior faculty in their early years and in advance of tenure. Contacts suggest that junior faculty greatly increase their ability to thrive when a senior faculty member supports their work both as an informal mentor and within the community of other researchers at the university. The senior faculty member can also play an influential role in lending a junior researcher gravitas in advance of tenure. The imprimatur of a respected tenured professor can influence the treatment of the junior faculty member’s scholarship by the tenure review committee. While such a mentor would benefit any junior faculty member, interdisciplinary researchers are arguably in greater need of support in the face of a potentially skeptical tenure committee.

The Fate of Interdisciplinarity Rests with College Deans

When University K moved institutionally toward cluster hiring, contacts explain, one college experienced outstanding success with the transition described above: high-caliber new hires, senior-level faculty coming to University K, and increased interest in positions from strong minority and female candidates. Other colleges did not experience the same level of success. Contacts suggest that the dean of the successful college strongly supported the institutional direction, and used the opportunity to push the college hard in that direction, countering resistance efforts along the way. At other colleges, resistance was met with retrenchment to traditional, disciplinary hires. These colleges did not experience the benefits seen at the most successful college as described by contacts.
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