Seven ways to get a grip on running a successful promotions process

Sept conseils pour l'instauration d'un processus de promotion efficace

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Abstract

Promotion within an academic institution is often a key component of a career; however, there are often barriers to successful applications. A streamlined and transparent process can assist faculty members in their goals of obtaining promotion, leading to greater security and satisfaction. This paper describes a methodology designed at a local level to maximize opportunities for success, in the hope that others may learn from the experience and advocate for similar changes within their own institutions.

Résumé

La promotion dans une établissement universitaire est souvent un élément clé dans la carrière. Or, les candidats se heurtent à bien des obstacles. Un processus simplifié et transparent peut aider les membres du corps professoral à atteindre leurs objectifs de promotion et leur apporter davantage de sécurité et de satisfaction. Cet article décrit la méthodologie que nous avons conçue localement pour maximiser les chances de réussite, dans l'espoir que notre expérience puisse être utile à d'autres enseignants qui souhaiteraient prôner des changements similaires au sein de leur établissement.

Introduction

For many clinicians, pursuit of an academic career is an aspiration from early on, whereas others develop academic interests later in their careers. Academic rank within a university is highly valued by both individuals and their institutions, and actively developing a portfolio with a goal towards promotion is frequently part of performance review processes.[1] A lack of structure can be a significant barrier to efficiency and transparency, which can lead to poor interest in both applying for and participating in the promotions process. We wish to share our experience in developing a structure which has enhanced the promotions experience.

1. Clarify the institutional promotions process

Institutions should have clear guidelines for faculty.[2] In our institution, we acknowledged that many promotions policies were aimed at non-clinical faculties and faculty members (e.g., requirements for research output), and so new guidelines were developed to recognize the different challenges that clinical faculty face and allow other achievements, such as involvement in quality assurance processes or receipt of teaching awards, to be considered as part of the process for the Faculty of Medicine. Universities typically have a hierarchical system of academic ranks, with increasing expectations and standards for promotion to progressively higher ranks. These are reflected in the various policies produced for our Faculty. Our institution permits candidates to select a category in which to apply, depending on their primary role

(Clinician-Teacher, Clinician-Researcher, Clinician-Educator or Clinician-Administrator).

See Figure 1 for an example of a University policy document outlining standards for promotion, which incorporates domains targeting clinical faculty members.

To be promoted to Associate Professor within the Faculty of Medicine as a Clinician Educator, you must either: 1. Fulfill **ALL** essential Transmission and Transformation of Knowledge (Academic Education) criteria, and some of the additional criteria (first Table below) 2. If the above has not been met, then also fulfill **MANY** essential and additional criteria of Application of Knowledge (Academic Practice) (second Table below)		
Transmission and Transformation of Knowledge (Academic Education) – Associate Professorship		
ESSENTIAL STANDARDS		NOTES
OUTPUT	1. Regularly and consistently publishes innovative educational research or methodology: a. Consistently as a primary author (first/second/last, or with explanation) b. In peer-reviewed regional/national/international education journals.	
	2. Development of an innovative curriculum/program noted for its excellence as a learning environment by formal evaluation.	
	3. Regularly and consistently presents educational observations/research/program description at regional/national/international meetings.	
	4. Teaches a variety of learners (undergraduate, graduate, postgraduate, peer, continuing or public education (including media interviews)).	
RECOGNITION	1. Receives grants with an education mandate.	
	2. Very good to excellent evaluations of teaching/educational activities by learners, peers, and/or external agencies.	
INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITMENT	1. Administrative teaching contribution within the University.	
ADDITIONAL STANDARDS		
OUTPUT	1. Effectively mentors others in the conduct of education related activities.	
	2. Development of learning resources (e.g., textbooks, computer programs, etc.) which have been widely employed nationally or internationally.	
RECOGNITION	1. Extended experience, by invitation, to present to a wide academic audience where the focus is on education (regionally, nationally or internationally) including undergraduate, postgraduate, graduate, continuing or public education.	
	2. Consistent productivity by directly supervised trainees (during and post supervision).	
	3. Recipient of faculty, university or external teaching award.	
INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITMENT	1. Administrative teaching contribution with a provincial/national/international agency/organization.	
	2. Organizes national/international education meetings and/or symposia.	

Figure 1. Excerpt from University document outlining Standards for promotion to Associate Professor for clinical faculty members

2. Develop and maintain appropriate administrative and logistical support

Departments and institutions should ensure that they have allocated adequate resources, both human and logistical, and created realistic time allocations to enable the administrators to complete their assigned tasks. Promotions are typically a drawn-out process; our process begins with a call for applications in September, with a cut-off date for submissions of the following June. Applications are collated, references are gathered, and the Committee meets and adjudicates decisions in November of the second year, with recommendations being made to the Dean and eventually the Senate of the University, and final official promotion being made in July of the following year – 22 months after the initial application had begun. Administrative staff with experience and a clear mandate for supporting promotions can ensure that faculty members are kept abreast of developments, references sourced in time, and that timelines are met, in order to avoid delays and having to wait for another promotions cycle.

3. Create appropriate faculty development resources

Faculty development is key to success in promotion; faculty require guidance on the various steps and requirements and will often need coaching on practical tips such as developing a teaching portfolio and selecting the correct referees.[3] Our institution holds regular sessions, both live and via recorded webinars, by a faculty member with expertise in this area, which has greatly improved success across our faculty.

We have created guidelines for referees, to ensure that conflicts of interest are avoided, and referees are explicitly requested to speak objectively to the information contained in the candidate's portfolio as opposed to their specific knowledge of the candidate. We review both internal and external references and ensure that their recommendations are valid and that stated criteria for promotion are being followed.

4. Recruit a representative committee to adjudicate applications

Promotions should be judged by a representative sample of peers and colleagues. Our committee has membership consisting of all academic ranks within our institution (Professor, Associate Professor and Assistant Professor) in an attempt to create diversity on the panel. As we have a distributed faculty, we have also ensured that we have representation from more than one site.[4] This has encouraged faculty from across our multiple sites to feel represented and apply for both committee membership and for promotion.

Our Faculty has a commitment to promoting Equity and Diversity, in both recruitment and promotion, and actively seeks opportunities for under-represented groups when considering promotion. This is included in the mandate of the faculty development expert, who is able to assist members in developing their portfolio and maximizing chances for success. Our department aims to promote a diverse range of worthy candidates and actively encourages faculty members to seek promotion. Faculty members may utilize the established tools and resources to maximize their chances of successful promotion.

5. Utilize technology to optimize committee meetings

Promotions Committee meetings can be long and arduous; we have increasingly utilized technology to visualize results (see #6) and thus streamline meetings, as well as to hold virtual meetings via videoconferencing. This allows us to include a more geographically diverse membership (see #4 above) and to maximize the use of our time. Efficient meetings have led to faster decision-making and to greater satisfaction and engagement amongst committee members.

6. Develop a rubric for adjudicating applications

We have created a requirement for candidates to complete a survey tool prior to official submission of their application. This allows them to gauge their current status and obtain a realistic sense of their likelihood of success, which in turn reduces the potential for disappointment from a failed application. The tool uses a similar rubric to that used during adjudication, which simplifies and harmonizes the process.

We feel that the most important development has been the use of a rubric for both self-study by candidates and adjudication by committee members. We assigned four categories of assessment under each standard – "Does not meet," "Needs more work," "Meets," and "Exceeds." Each of these was then allocated a colour code, which creates a readily analyzable matrix. During committee meetings, substantial discussion is only required for those areas which demonstrate significant deviation between members; if there is general agreement that a standard has been met, then little further discussion is required and more time can be spent on areas where there is less congruency of opinion.

See Figure 2 for an example from a rubric from a successful application. Coloured cells demonstrate various opinions from committee members, and highlight areas requiring further detailed discussion.

7. Provide and solicit feedback

It is always difficult to explain the rationale for a declined application to an unsuccessful candidate; there is frustration at the amount of time and effort spent, and frequently a difficulty in explaining the rationale behind the decision, as candidates may not always self-assess themselves in congruence with the committee members. By using the self-study tool and the assessment rubric, especially when they are using the same colour-coding schematic, the decision can be easily visualized and therefore more clearly explained and hopefully understood, and coaching provided aimed at successful promotion in future. We request feedback from candidates, whether they are successful or unsuccessful, in an attempt at continuous quality improvement. We try to incorporate their suggestions, particularly around the self-study and adjudication rubrics, for the benefit of future applicants and committee members. This approach has led to a greater appreciation of the work of the committee and increased interest in involvement in the process.

We suggest that Promotions Committees engage in data-gathering, to determine some or all of the following: proportion of faculty members at various academic ranks and categories; demographics of applicants, linked to academic rank; and proportion of successful first-time applicants. This can help guide the overall process of targeting and encouraging individuals for promotion.

Conclusion

Utilizing these guidelines particularly the use of rubrics, can 1) improve and enhance existing processes used to determine promotion in an academic environment, 2) maximize opportunities for success and reduce disappointment, and 3) lead to a more rewarding experience for all those involved in it.

Infrastructure Commitment	b) Contributions to ▮▮▮ University committees.	Exceeds	Meets	Meets	Meets	Meets
	2. Service to the community outside ▮▮▮ (One or more of the following):					
	a) Organizes provincial/national/international clinical care meetings and/or symposia for one's field	Needs More Work	Needs More Work	Needs More Work	Meets	Exceeds
	b) Provides professional service and/or advocacy to the broader community	Meets	Needs More Work	Meets	Meets	Exceeds
	c) Reviewer of clinical/practice-based papers of national/international clinical/scientific/practice-based journals	Meets	Needs More Work	Does Not Meet	Needs More Work	Does Not Meet
	d) Editorial board of national/international peer reviewed journal	Needs More Work	Needs More Work	Does Not Meet	Does Not Meet	Does Not Meet
	e) Role in licensing, accreditation or practice standards development at the national/international level	Meets	Meets	Meets	Needs More Work	Does Not Meet
	f) Member of a clinical trial data monitoring/patient safety committee	Needs More Work	Does Not Meet	Does Not Meet	Does Not Meet	Meets
	g) Reviewer of grants of provincial/national/international granting agencies	Needs More Work	Does Not Meet	Does Not Meet	Does Not Meet	Needs More Work
	h) Other service to the community, with explanation of significance	Meets	Meets	Meets	Needs More Work	Meets

ADDITIONAL CRITERIA

Output	1. Excellent mentor for students.	Exceeds	Meets	Meets	Meets	Exceeds
	2. Contributes to the development of innovative and effective protocols or patient care services/pathways that are nationally recognized	Meets	Meets	Meets	Meets	Meets
	3. Book author/editor (other non-peer reviewed)	Meets	Needs More Work	Needs More Work	Meets	Needs More Work
Recognition	1. Invited lectureships attributable to the individual's reputation.	Meets	Meets	Meets	Meets	Exceeds
	2. Recognized by a professional body for contributions in healthcare or a related field.	Meets	Needs More Work	Needs More Work	Meets	Meets

Table 3 'Transmission and Transformation of Knowledge (Academic Education)' scholarship

ESSENTIAL CRITERIA

1. Regularly and consistently publishes innovative educational research or methodology:					
a) Consistently as a primary author (first / second / last, or with explanation)	Needs More Work	Needs More Work	Does Not Meet	Meets	Needs More Work
b) In peer-reviewed regional / national / international professional journals.	Meets	Meets	Meets	Meets	Needs More Work

Figure 2. Excerpt from Promotions Committee Adjudication Rubric for successful candidate to Associate Professor

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