

FROM THE WHITE PAPER  
SERIES FROM THE  
COLLABORATIVE ON  
ACADEMIC CAREERS IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION  
(COACHE)

# Benchmark Best Practices

collaborative on  
academic careers  
in higher education



This series of white papers is offered freely to member institutions as part of our project's three-year support and engagement plan.

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**Suggested citation:**

Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education. (2014). *Benchmark Best Practices: Departmental Leadership*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education.

# Benchmark Best Practices: Tenure and Promotion

## What is measured in these benchmarks?

### TENURE POLICIES

Clarity of:

- The tenure process in my department
- The tenure criteria (what things are evaluated) in my department
- The tenure standards (the performance thresholds) in my department
- The body of evidence (the dossier's contents) that will be considered in making my tenure decision
- My sense of whether or not I will achieve tenure

Agreement (or disagreement) with the following statements:

- I have received consistent messages from tenured faculty about the requirements for tenure
- In my opinion, tenure decisions here are made primarily on performance-based criteria (e.g., research/creative work, teaching, and/or service) rather than on non-performance-based criteria (e.g., politics, relationships, and/or demographics)

### TENURE CLARITY

Clarity of tenure expectations as:

- A scholar
- A teacher
- An advisor to students
- A colleague in your department
- A campus citizen
- A member of the broader community (e.g., outreach)

### PROMOTION

Clarity about:

- The promotion process in my department
- The promotion criteria (what things are evaluated) in my department
- The promotion standards (the performance thresholds) in my department
- The body of evidence (the dossier's contents) considered in making promotion decisions
- The time frame within which associate professors should apply for promotion
- My sense of whether I will be promoted from associate to full professor

Agreement (or disagreement) with the following statements:

- My department has a culture where associate professors are encouraged to work towards promotion to full professorship
- Generally, the expectations for promotion from associate to full professor are reasonable to me
- The promotion standards (the performance thresholds) in my department
- The body of evidence (the dossier's contents) considered in making promotion decisions
- The time frame within which associate professors should apply for promotion
- My sense of whether I will be promoted from associate to full professor

Agreement (or disagreement) with the following statements:

- My department has a culture where associate professors are encouraged to work towards promotion to full professorship
- Generally, the expectations for promotion from associate to full professor are reasonable to me

### **Why Support for Tenure and Promotion Is Important**

*Tenure.* Administrators and faculty alike acknowledge that, at most institutions, the bar to achieve tenure has risen over time. While it is impossible to eliminate anxiety from the minds of all pre-tenure faculty members, or the pressures exerted on their lives en route to tenure, academic leaders can improve the clarity of tenure policies and expectations, and the satisfaction of their faculty, without sacrificing rigor. After so much has been invested to recruit and to hire them, pre-tenure faculty are owed consistent messages (e.g., written criteria and standards) about what is required for tenure and credible assurances of fairness and equity, that is, that tenure decisions are based on performance, not influenced by demographics, relationships, or departmental politics.

*Promotion.* While the academy has recently improved many policies for assistant professors (e.g., research leave; stop-the-tenure-clock; part-time tenure-track options), it has done far less for associate professors. Ideas—some truly novel, others novel only to this rank—have emerged from COACHE research on tenured faculty. These include modified duties such as reduced teaching load; sabbatical planning and other workshops; workload shifts (i.e., more teaching or more research); improved communication about timing for promotion and a nudge to stand for full; small grants to support mid-career faculty (e.g., matching funds, travel support); a trigger mechanism, such as a ninth year review; and broader, more inclusive criteria. To clarify the process, criteria, standards, and body of evidence for promotion to full professor, and to provide some semblance of reasonableness of expectations for associate professors, COACHE included two new survey dimensions. The first asks faculty to rate the clarity about the timeframe for putting oneself forward for promotion to full; the second measures the extent to which there exists a departmental culture that encourages faculty to seek promotion to full rather than languish unheeded at the rank of associate.

### **Getting Started**

In addressing issues of tenure for early-career faculty:

- Tell tenure-track faculty what to expect during the interview stage, reinforce expectations prior to their arrival on campus, and discuss them again in orientation sessions during their first year. Too many institutions miss the first two opportunities.
- Set weights or priorities with tenure-track faculty members so that they can focus their work in those areas which count most.
- If collegiality, outreach, and service count in the tenure process, provide definitions, say how they count, and state how they will be measured.
- Provide relevant written information. Pre-tenure faculty members should be informed about where to find all the information they need to feel comfortable with the tenure process and with their campus. They appreciate intuitively-organized websites with easy to access links to relevant policies and people.
- Provide new faculty orientations as well as workshops to support effective teaching and research throughout the pre-tenure years.
- Host Q&A sessions or provide other venues where pre-tenure faculty can safely ask difficult questions.
- Provide plenty of feedback along the way—annually, and then more thoroughly in a third- or fourth-year review. Annual reviews, put in writing after the face-to-face discussion, are particularly helpful; midpoint reviews with specific guidance are crucial to pre-tenure faculty sense of clarity, satisfaction, and ultimately, success.
- Teach departments chairs to deliver clear performance feedback to pre-tenure faculty annually and more comprehensively at mid-point.

- Provide sample dossiers to pre-tenure faculty and sample feedback letters to those responsible for writing them.
- Hire tenure-track faculty with the explicit and repeated expectation that they will achieve tenure, not that they might be “weeded out.”
- Ensure open doors for early-career faculty to chairs and senior faculty members in the department. The most clear and satisfied pre-tenure faculty have such access not only for questions about tenure, but also for feedback, opportunities to collaborate, and collegueship.

Many of these policies, and the principles behind them, apply similarly to associate professors on the path to promotion in rank. Additional considerations include:

- Be cognizant of the workload placed on associate professors. They often find themselves buried suddenly with service, mentoring of tenure-track faculty, and more student advising, as well as more leadership and administrative duties that may get in the way of their trajectory to promotion.
- Provide mentors. Just because a faculty member earns tenure and is promoted to the associate rank does not mean that s/he no longer needs or wants a mentor.

# Benchmark Best Practices: Departmental Leadership

## What is measured in this benchmark?

### DEPARTMENTAL LEADERSHIP

Satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with my department head's or chair's:

- Pace of decision making
- Stated priorities
- Communication of priorities to faculty
- Ensuring opportunities for faculty to have input into departmental policy decisions
- Fairness in evaluating my work

## Why Support for Departmental Leadership Is Important

Academic leaders—especially the provost, dean, and department chair—play critical roles in shaping the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of faculty members. COACHE's 2010 pilot study of tenured faculty found that faculty desire from the administration a clearly-articulated institutional mission and vision that do not change in ways that adversely affect faculty work (e.g., focus on research over teaching or vice versa; expectations for generating funding from outside grants). Faculty also wish for clear and consistent expectations for the mix of research, teaching, and service or outreach; support for research (pre- and post-award) and teaching; and a sense that their work is valued.

Deans and department chairs (or heads) can improve faculty morale through honest communication, and particularly by involving faculty in meaningful decisions that affect them. Deans and chairs are also responsible for ensuring opportunities for faculty input and supporting faculty in adapting to any changes to mission and institutional priorities. Equity and fairness in faculty evaluation are also important factors when assessing department head or chair leadership.

Benchmark Best Practices

## Getting Started

- Ensure that resources are allocated effectively to support changes in faculty work.
- Be careful not to let tenure-track faculty get caught unaware, unsuspecting, or unprepared for shifts in priorities. For example, guidelines for tenure and promotion should not be changed midstream; commitments should be honored.
- Allow senior faculty members grace periods to adjust to new expectations.
- Be transparent: it is almost impossible to over-communicate with faculty about changes to mission, institutional priorities, and resource allocation.
- Consistent messaging is pivotal to strong leadership: work diligently to ensure that senior, divisional, and departmental leaders are hearing and communicating the same message about institutional priorities.
- Priorities must be communicated via multiple channels, media, and venues. A blanket email or a website update does not adequately ensure broad communication of institutional priorities. Develop a communication plan that considers how the faculty everywhere—even the hard-to-reach—get information.
- Provide management training and periodic educational sessions for department chairs. Offer them a “Chair Handbook” and a web portal with “one stop shopping” for chairs on mentoring approaches, career mapping tools, and access to advice from peers.
- Create opportunities for chairs to convene—perhaps without a dean or provost present—to discuss best practices, innovations, and shared struggles. Then, invite them to share their take-aways with the deans' council or other senior administrators.

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## About COACHE

The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) is a consortium of more than 200 colleges and universities across North America committed to making the academic workplace more attractive and equitable for faculty. Founded in 2002 with support from the Ford Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies, COACHE is based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and is now supported by its members.

Designed to generate not simply “interesting” data, but actionable diagnoses, COACHE’s suite of faculty job satisfaction surveys have been tested and continuously improved across multiple administration sites and cycles. Institutional reports and executive dashboards provide college leaders with a lever to increase the quality of work-life for their faculty; to advance a reputation as a great place for faculty to work; to provoke better questions from and more informed decisions by prospective faculty; and to generate ideas and initiatives from faculty that enrich and expand the range of possible improvements.

COACHE also brings academic leaders together to advance our mutual goals of maximizing the impact of the data, with many opportunities to meet with counterparts from peer institutions and to discuss COACHE findings on faculty affairs.

Call (617) 495-5285 to request your invitation to participate.

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