

Reimagining Promotion to Full Professor

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What qualifies someone to be promoted to full professor at RIT? Though the answer varies from college to college and department to department, as it should, in every case it takes into account the relative importance of teaching and scholarship, with service a distant third. Too often, this accounting turns into a zero-sum game, with teaching and scholarship vying for pride of place, one at the expense of the other. And notwithstanding claims for the equality of teaching and research, associate professors cannot help but see publication as the avenue to full professorship.

We continually approach but never quite reach clarity on this topic. Perhaps, then, we should rethink, not just promotion criteria, but the very nature of the post-tenure career as it leads toward promotion—or not, as some faculty will remain contentedly at the associate level by choice. Recent discussions at RIT of tenure, promotion, and post-tenure mentoring have made this an opportune moment to reimagine the entire journey from tenure to promotion rather than focusing so tightly on the destination alone.

What follows is an argument for offering associate professors flexibility in designing post-tenure careers with full professorship in mind. Flexible career planning for tenured faculty is in keeping with the overarching themes and vision RIT's new Strategic Plan: "Greatness through Difference." The preface to that document notes that throughout its history RIT "has always been a different kind of academic institution," one driven by "practicality, attention to student needs, and taste for doing things differently."¹ Multiple pathways to promotion offer strength in variety, where academics can shape their careers based primarily on individual talents and interests, without feeling constrained by—but never losing sight of—the importance of research.

¹ *Greatness Through Difference: 2015-2025 Strategic Plan of the Rochester Institute of Technology*, p. 3.

Promotion Criteria at RIT

The recent revision of RIT Policy E6.0, “Faculty Rank and Promotion” (April 18, 2013) and the publication of “Thoughts on promotion to full professor” by Provost Jeremy Haefner (January 2014) have added clarity to promotion criteria, while leaving room for interpretation. The foundational language from the policy is in D.1., Criteria for Promotion to Professor:

The basis for the promotion of an Associate Professor to Professor is effectiveness of teaching, the quality and scope of scholarship, and service including the leadership in or contributions to professional activities on and off campus.

Since receiving tenure and promotion from Assistant Professor to Associate Professor, candidates shall be judged in terms of whether they have an established record that indicates continued growth, development and accomplishment in teaching; research, scholarship or creative work; and service including leadership, as described in [E4.0 Faculty Employment Policies](#). Candidates for promotion shall be judged in terms of whether they have a record that is deemed excellent overall.

In his “Thoughts on Promotion,” Provost Haefner writes, “This language need not be interpreted to mean that the candidate must be evaluated as excellent in all three areas to warrant promotion” (p. 2). Further:

While this paper is intended to provoke a discussion about promotion consideration that will serve in a majority of promotion cases, there may be some exceptional cases that simply do not fit these expectations yet clearly make a compelling case for promotion. As a result, we should be flexible in our interpretation of these expectations so that these exceptional cases are not casualties of strict bureaucracy. (p. 3-4, emphasis added)

To be promoted to full professor, then, the candidate must show “continued growth, development and accomplishment” in all three categories—teaching, scholarship, service—since receiving tenure, as well as “excellence overall,” which clearly does not mean excellence in each of the categories. Rather, excellence overall appears to describe a fully engaged academic who has advanced his or her career as a teacher/scholar while taking part in significant service and leadership.

This language suggests candidates for promotion may build a more-or-less balanced portfolio; however, it has been interpreted narrowly to focus on scholarship, principally peer-reviewed publications, monographs, and, more recently, grants. For some, perhaps many, associate professors, that interpretation is appropriate. Others would benefit from the opportunity to design long-term plans of work that balanced the three traditional categories in line with individual career goals. This could mean a plan with emphasis on teaching and service, while maintaining the requisite “growth, development and accomplishment” in scholarship.

One noteworthy movement away from the dominance of scholarship and toward a more flexible route to promotion is taking shape at Ohio State University. Their approach to re-balancing the academic promotion portfolio offers insights to the process and a model for other universities.

The Ohio State University Flexible Pathways to Promotion

About five years ago, then-president of Ohio State University (OSU) Gordon Gee stirred the pot by mentioning publicly that it was time to reconsider how universities award tenure.² In fact, OSU was embarking on a project to rethink and re-envision paths to promotion, as well, specifically by dialing back on scholarship requirements, a significant step at an R1 university. The changes were reported by *Inside Higher Ed*:

Not only does Ohio State want to end the all-out dominance of research considerations in reviews for full professor, but the university wants to explore options where some academics might earn promotions based largely on research (and have their subsequent careers reshaped with that focus) while others might earn promotions based largely on teaching (and similarly have career expectations adjusted). Both could earn the title of full professor.³

The OSU plan, “Flexible Pathways to Promotion,” calls for a portfolio balanced among teaching, scholarship, and service; an option to earn promotion based largely on teaching and service; and long-term individualized career planning. What the plan does not establish is a system whereby associate professors opt for either research or teaching “tracks.” That is, someone who elects to focus on teaching does not opt out of maintaining a program of research, or vice versa.

At the heart of Flexible Pathways is a commitment to rewarding *impact*, the positive difference faculty make: in the classroom, in the laboratory, in print, in governance. We can easily count and weight the impact of publications (for instance, by citations) and tote up grants. How to measure the impact of teaching and service is more challenging, as those at OSU responsible for rolling out Flexible Pathways confirm.

According to Susan S. Williams, Vice Provost for Academic Policy and Faculty Resources at OSU, the university is feeling its way along concerning impact.

“If someone is a great teacher or national leader,” says Williams, “that should count toward promotion. Impact may not be quantitative, yet someone can make a difference.”⁴

What is crucial is that faculty carefully document the impact of their work. Those coming up for promotion should include a strong narrative to explain and illustrate that impact. “Ultimately, faculty are primarily responsible for the advancement of their own careers and for telling their own stories,” Williams says.

Flexible Pathways at OSU is a work in progress, although Williams reports that already faculty have been promoted to full professor based on portfolios weighted toward teaching and service.

“The concept in play” at OSU, according to *Inside Higher Ed*, “would end the myth that candidates for full professor (and maybe, someday, candidates for tenure) should be great in everything. Why? Because most professors aren’t great at everything.”⁵

² Scott Jaschik, “[Different Paths to Full Professor](#),” *Inside Higher Ed*, March 5, 2010.

³ “[Different Paths to Full Professor](#),” p. 1.

⁴ Phone interview with the author, September 2014.

⁵ “[Different Paths to Full Professor](#),” p. 1.

Flexible Promotion Criteria and Planning at RIT

Gordon Gee, drawing on spiritual metaphors, has spoken of a time when associate professors would find “their real callings” and take advantage of “multiple ways to salvation.”⁶ What form might this vision take at RIT? Following is an overview of one possibility.

1. All associate professors would establish a long-term plan of work soon after achieving tenure. That plan—as with any strategy, subject to revision—would seek a balance among the three categories of teaching, research, and service, but it could be focused on any two of the categories (never only one) while still maintaining a record of growth, development, and accomplishment in all three.
2. Working with department heads, associate professors would determine methods for measuring impact in all three categories in keeping with individual career goals, disciplinary standards, and departmental expectations. These measures would be reviewed annually with the department head to track progress toward promotion.
3. Associates coming up for promotion would compose narratives to describe the arc of their post-tenure careers, with special attention paid to explaining and illustrating the impact of their work in all three categories.

This entire process will benefit from effective post-tenure mentoring from within and without a candidate’s home department. Such guidance will be especially helpful in identifying measures of impact locally and beyond the university.

Deciding how to measure the impact of teaching and service is the core task in this model. We have measures in place for teaching, including student and peer evaluations. Others could be, for example, developing successful curricular changes, designing new courses, implementing novel pedagogies in established courses, and advancing teaching innovation through publications and/or presentations. The impact of service could be evaluated in terms of, for example, successful committee and task force outcomes, leadership roles and results, and the authoring of new policies. Any measures would, as noted above, be developed by candidates and their chairs; however, the dean would play a central role to insure consistency and comparability among departments.

Also critical is the design and maintenance of long-range career plans for associate professors. Annual reviews could map progress toward promotion against these plans, which could be regularly updated and altered.

⁶ [“Different Paths to Full Professor,”](#) p. 1.

Flexible Promotion Criteria and RIT's Strategic Plan

The question remains: What would flexible promotion criteria mean for the future of RIT as it positions itself to become “a great global university that applies its distinctive assets to solve the complex problems of a shrinking world and a complex planet?”⁷ Simply, how would flexible promotion criteria benefit RIT?

Notwithstanding its commitment to research and sharpened focus on graduate education, RIT's dedication to undergraduate teaching remains paramount, as stated in Dimension One, Career Education and Students Success, of the 2015-2025 Strategic Plan: “Cultivating student success is what we do—it is and will continue to be our core mission.” Further, the balance of teaching and research is struck in the Plan's Dimension Two, The Student-Centered Research University: “As a student-centered research university, RIT combines the mission-critical activities of research, scholarship, artistic creation, creative inquiry, teaching, and learning across all degree levels and disciplines.”

Applying flexible promotion criteria need not undercut in any way RIT's commitment to research excellence. All faculty seeking promotion to full professor would be required to pursue a productive research agenda. Those determined and encouraged to focus on research and publication would still do so. What the flexible criteria allow for is a balance between teaching and research in the promotion portfolio, as well as the opportunity for promotion based primarily, but not solely, on teaching and service.

This approach to promotion also provides a way forward for RIT faculty caught in the transition to a more research-focused university. Those hired when research and publication were not as important to the promotion portfolio and who find themselves stuck at the associate level could develop a long-term plan of work that plays to their strengths and offers an opportunity for promotion.

The potential benefits of flexible promotion criteria and planning are several: increased opportunities for associate professors to shape their own careers, greater clarity of expectations through individualized plans, more balanced portfolios of achievement, and a shared responsibility for ensuring faculty success. With multiple paths to promotion (or salvation) faculty would be better able to find their own way to career success and satisfaction. Finally, and importantly, flexible promotion criteria would affirm RIT's longstanding commitment to superior classroom instruction at a student-centered university.

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⁷ “Vision” in *Greatness Through Difference: 2015-2025 Strategic Plan of the Rochester Institute of Technology*