Guest Column: What's New for Faculty Off the Tenure Track

Nontenure-Track Working Group of the UA Faculty Senate
March 2017

Tenure is long-established and critically important to higher education, but the mission-central work of teaching, research and service here at the University of Arizona is also performed by a cadre of talented and dedicated faculty off the tenure track. These faculty teach, both in our classrooms and our clinics, and conduct the kind of ground-breaking research that cements the UA’s membership in the Association of American Universities, a group of the nation’s most prestigious research institutions. Many of these faculty report that they would enjoy career employment at the UA – meaning, work at the UA through retirement – if possible. Their work and contributions are featured on the University of Arizona website welcome page, recognized nationally and internationally for impact on the student learning experience, and continue to benefit the health and wellness of our communities.

In order to examine and respond to emerging needs for this group of UA faculty, a Nontenure-Track Working Group was formed in 2013 by the Faculty Senate, and reconstituted in spring 2015 to focus on recommendations around better processes for contracts, reviews, promotion and career advancement. Members of the working group conducted a survey[1] of all faculty at the UA to get a sense of the challenges and opportunities, and then met with various shared governance groups as part of an effort to make feasible, well-supported recommendations.

Much has happened in the last few years to move us in the direction of progress and improvement. The provost, multiple academic deans, and unit heads and directors supported the establishment of a minimum salary for full-time, academic year non-tenure-track faculty, resulting in salary adjustments for a number of faculty off the tenure track. The Faculty Senate passed a resolution, subsequently signed by President Ann Weaver Hart, to expand the definition of general faculty. Under the new definition, all faculty are unified under common governance, and more long-term faculty off the tenure track are now able to participate actively in shared governance. With the leadership of the Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs, the University Handbook for Appointed Personnel was updated to clarify promotion processes and possible timelines for faculty off the tenure track.

There is, of course, always more that can be done, and we would like to share two particularly exciting recent developments. The first is related to promotion and career ladder. When the working group asked the UA’s 3,793 faculty members – both on and off the tenure track – to weigh in on their highest priorities for themselves and their peers, among the most frequently selected priority was ensuring that faculty off the tenure track have clear paths to promotion or career advancement. This stems not only from an interest in fairness to faculty, but also an acknowledgement of the contributions made by faculty off the tenure track to all aspects of the institution.
We're happy to answer the call for more fairness and clarity. With enthusiastic support from the Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs, a workshop dedicated to the emerging needs of faculty off the tenure track will be held Tuesday in Old Main's Silver and Sage Room from 8:30-10 a.m. All faculty off the tenure track are welcome to join our discussions, which will focus on resources and strategies for engaging in conversations with supervisors about promotion. Heads and directors from a number of UA units will offer advice on how to use the promotion review process to document contributions and effectiveness, and we will review some of the resources and forms available. We look forward to interesting and useful discussions that result in movement toward appropriate paths to promotion.

The second item we're exploring is naming conventions. Right now, "nontenure-track" or "nontenure-eligible" serve as overall descriptors for faculty who, as the names suggest, are off the tenure track. Following discussions with a number of institutional leaders, it seems clear the UA is ready to move away from "NTT/NTE" as our overall descriptors for instructors, lecturers, research professors, clinical professors, professors of practice and nontenure-eligible professors. While this would not be a change in policies that apply to faculty, nor a change to any current titles or ranks, it would move us toward a unified label for these faculty who identify with them based on their contributions rather than identifying them based on their lack of membership in the tenured ranks. We are excited to explore the options and come up with recommendations that best reflect what we value and prefer here at the UA.

To RSVP for the "Promotion Opportunities for Faculty Not on the Tenure Track" workshop or any other spring 2017 workshops being conducted by the Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs, please click here.

For questions about the promotion workshop, or to participate in discussions about naming conventions and nomenclature, please reach out to Mika Galilee-Belfer at mikagb@email.arizona.edu.

Mika Galilee-Belfer is director of strategic planning and special projects at the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Amy Fountain is an associate professor in the Department of Linguistics. Daisy Pitkin is an assistant professor in the Honors College. Jeremy Frey is a lecturer in the Department of English.

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[3] mailto:mikagb@email.arizona.edu