June 29, 2016 ADVANCE Meeting with Provost Grasso
Promotion & Tenure (P&T): Potential for Bias

An objective of UD’s NSF ADVANCE Institutional Transformation grant is to “increase transparency of policies, procedure, and practices that affect faculty careers.” The motivation is to minimize the influence of bias. When it comes to P&T, lack of clear policies, criteria and evaluation processes leaves room for subjective judgment of candidates, which disproportionately disadvantages women and faculty of color.¹

UD’s faculty are concerned about transparency in the P&T process. Preliminary data from the 2016 faculty climate survey suggest that this concern is exacerbated for women faculty. For example, our survey asked faculty to rate how consistent P&T criteria are with the stated responsibilities of their positions. More than a quarter of the male faculty (28%) perceived the criteria as extremely consistent with their stated responsibilities, compared to only 18% of female faculty who saw it as such. Conversely, 12% of men perceived the criteria were not consistent, compared to 19% of women. These preliminary data indicate a gendered dynamic with regard to perceptions of the P&T process.

Departmental P&T documents are designed to demystify the process and ensure consistent evaluation of candidates. However, the documents are not always as clear as their authors intend. Notably, in some cases, these documents may even contain unintentionally biased language or policies. The ADVANCE Institute is keenly aware of this, and as such, wrote into the grant that “[s]elected senior faculty will review university documents and policies (e.g., departmental P&T and workload documents ...) to screen for unclear or unintentionally discriminatory language or policy.... The expected outcome is improved transparency and climate.”

It is most propitious that in year two of the ADVANCE grant, all departments have had to revise their P&T documents. The documents have thus been recently reviewed at the departmental level, likely resulting in improved clarity. We understand that additional review is to be conducted by a committee at the university level. We strongly endorse this committee’s charge, and request that at least one ADVANCE-affiliated faculty member be placed on the committee. With data indicating a difference between men and women’s perceptions of clarity in the P&T process, it is especially important that faculty with expertise in best practices for fair evaluation – and with an eye for language that unintentionally discriminates against women or people of color – contribute to the committee. We would also be pleased to assist the provost in writing a formal charge to the committee that emphasizes the importance of clear and transparent policies.


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