

University Reappointment, Promotion and Tenure Committee (URPTC)
Annual Process Review
April 25, 2022

Provost's Response August, 2022

The University Reappointment, Promotion and Tenure Committee (URPTC) reviewed a total of 18 dossiers from tenure and professional track faculty engaged in the 2021 - 2022 RPT cycle. The reviewed dossiers of tenure and professional track faculty presented actions for tenure, promotion, or both, at multiple ranks and from all ten colleges and the Division of Academic and Student Affairs (DASA). This report summarizes issues that emerged over the course of the review process that we believe warrant the attention of the administration. The identified issues range from procedural inconsistencies that can be remedied through emphasis on existing policy, to more complex, systemic challenges that require extensive consideration prior to formulating potential solutions.

(a) COVID-19 Impact

Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented unique challenges to the entire University community, which resulted in modifications as to how business is conducted within the University environment. Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 challenge has significantly impacted the current RPT process and is likely to influence future cycles even as the crisis appears to be diminishing.

To gauge the impact of COVID-19 on the RPT process, faculty have had the option of adding a COVID-19 impact statement to their dossiers for the first time. The URPTC viewed the solicitation of such statements as entirely positive and debated as to whether such statements should be made mandatory without reaching a consensus. We have specifically reviewed all dossiers for such statements and find the following: out of 18 dossiers reviewed, 4 dossiers included such COVID-19 impact statements (1 mandatory, 3 random), while 5 others mentioned/discussed the impact of COVID-19 in different parts of their dossiers; 9 of the 18 dossiers did not mention COVID-19 at all.

Faculty dossiers report extensively on work-related challenges faced during these COVID-19 times. In no particular order, these include: student mental and physical health issues, the difficulties of maintaining research productivity, technological challenges in dealing with new teaching methods and environments, student morale and apathy issues, difficulties with student recruitment, problems with extension/outreach given COVID-19 cancellations, wasted efforts in teaching and research due to cancellations, reduced research collaborations, supply chain issues, difficulties with research travel, and the time needed to develop online course.

Although the above represent work-related challenges, it is also clear that faculty have faced significant personal challenges as well. Here, COVID-19 impact appears to have disproportionately affected faculty with families – especially those with small children – who report on childcare, daycare and homeschooling issues. Faculty reported that the COVID-19 times have been “traumatic, challenging, and exhausting both mentally and physically.” One faculty member delayed the RPT process by a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation: We recommend that the University continue to solicit COVID-19 impact statements in the coming years. We believe that the purpose and use of these COVID-19 statements should be clarified for both RPT candidates and everyone involved in the process.

Response:

Thank you for this feedback which is particularly valuable during this first year of COVID Impact Statements. Upon review of all 118 dossiers, just over 40% did include COVID related information in their candidate statements. As you noted, this ranged from describing impacts on teaching; disruptions to data collection; disruption to professional meetings and meetings with community stakeholders and extension partners; challenges with students to the impact on their personal lives. We observed that many DVFs, Department Heads, College Committees and Deans very clearly read the impact statements with care and took them into consideration when evaluating the impact and quality of the candidate's work. We agree with your assessment and are continuing the option for faculty to include these statements next year and likely beyond. We will also be continuing conversations with RPT candidates, DVF and CRPTC members, and department heads about the Impact Statements through the RPT information sessions, separate information sessions about the Impact Statements, and meetings with department heads.

(b) Elucidate the Meaning of Faculty Statement of Faculty Responsibilities (SFRs)

SFRs in their current form were implemented relatively recently, and faculty are still adapting to the documentation of their distribution of effort. SFRs are a convenient way of categorizing faculty effort from an administrative point of view; it does allow for dynamic adjustments via the "Explanation of Changes" section; URPTC noted that faculty – in contrast to former years -- are beginning to use this tool and track changes in their dossiers.

However, the URPTC noted confusion and inconsistency in how SFRs were used as a tool in judging faculty success and, as such, SFR meaning and interpretations needs to be clarified across the colleges. Given the broad and heterogeneous nature of faculty activities, it may be impossible that any numerical measurement such as SFRs can completely capture the actual distribution of effort *a priori*. University and, in particular, faculty activity is dynamic in nature, and as such change can always be expected (COVID-19 being a case in point). It is therefore not always clear what magnitude of change is required for an SFR update. While SFRs do capture faculty activities in a broad sense, it is probably not sensible to base judgements on a too fine grained of an interpretation of SFRs. For instance, what is the difference between an SFR of 40% or 45% in a given area? **Is it meaningful to record SFRs of 2% or 3%? If a candidate's performance is outstanding in 80 – 90 % of his/her SFR activities, is it fair to hold back a candidate for a perceived weakness in 5% of SFR activities?** This year, the URPTC noted instances of both DVF and CRPTC struggling with this issue.

Recommendation: The meaning of SFRs and how to interpret them needs to be clarified across the colleges. Faculty at all levels may need guidance with regards to the importance of SFRs and what kinds of changes would require an update or an "explanation of changes".

Recognizing that NC State is a heterogeneous institution with diverse colleges, how SFRs are used and interpreted should at least be uniform within a given college environment.

Response:

SFRs and when to make changes to them are discussed in several places: new faculty orientation, new department head orientation and in the RPT campus information sessions. It may also be helpful to hold an annual information session that focuses solely on SFRs. Furthermore, we can certainly explore with colleges establishing uniformity on how SFRs are used and interpreted within a college environment; however, some colleges are very diverse and this may be more challenging for those colleges.

(c) Promotion for Professional Faculty

Over the past years, NC State has seen considerable growth in the number of professional faculty in many of its colleges and departments. These are valued professionals who may aim to spend a good portion of their professional lives at NC State and, as such, proper career plans should be developed for them. Many of these professional faculty have now been at the University a good number of years and are coming up for promotion. It is the URPTC observation that there seems to be no consistent plan or way of judging such professionals in all the colleges; in many cases, there are inadequate rules and regulations governing the promotion of such faculty. In the absence of such guidance, faculty and administrators resort to treating professional faculty as “tenure track faculty lite”, extrapolating from their RPT experience for regular tenure track faculty. Given the diversity of professional faculty across the different university colleges and their differing areas of responsibility, the university and professional faculty may not be well served by this.

For instance, tenured faculty at NC State have teaching, research and extension/outreach responsibilities and are expected to develop excellence in all these areas. The URPTC observed that professional faculty are often judged by similar criteria, even if this is not entirely sensible for them given their areas of responsibilities as defined by their SFRs. It is also not clear that professional faculty – provided their engagement with NC State is expected to be long term – receive career guidance as tenure track faculty do. We note that in some cases, professional faculty may need to be given resources similar to “startup packages” for regular tenure track faculty if they are to fulfill their stated responsibilities.

Recommendations: Currently, departments and colleges at NC State have codified rules and regulations governing the RPT process for tenured track faculty. It is recommended that rules governing the RPT process for professional faculty continue to be developed, including consideration of professional faculty input or representation on RPT committees at the appropriate level. Long term professional faculty should also receive guidance and mentoring to help navigate this process.

Response:

Thank you for this important feedback. The professional faculty regulation was revised in 2020 to require that departments establish promotion standards in any track in which they have appointed full-time faculty, and then the pandemic hit. As we emerge, it is vital to help

departments re-engage in this meaningful work. The Provost's Office and the Office for Faculty Excellence have several projects underway to assist in this regard: Dr. Michelle Bartlett, Associate Teaching Professor in the College of Education, will be a Provost's Faculty Fellow in AY 2022-2023 and her work will focus on creating stronger and clearer pathways for professional track faculty. Through meetings with Dr. Katharine Stewart, collecting data at NC State and other institutions, and meetings with departments, it is the hope that this project will help departments to move forward with this work, revising their RPT rules or creating new rules that specifically address the promotion standards for relevant professional tracks.

In addition, the Office for Faculty Excellence has developed a Faculty Mentoring Central website. The website provides forms and resources related to mentoring for mentees, mentors, department heads and deans as well as general mentoring support and will serve as a resource in support of faculty, including professional faculty, career success and well-being.

(d) RPT Report Summaries

The URPTC noted that some DVF write ups may or may not have reflected a totally accurate summary of the actual RPT deliberations, and urge that future summaries faithfully reflect all aspects – **both positive and negative** -- of the true RPT discussions. In the particular cases in question, the DVF write ups typically presented a totally positive summary of the RPT deliberations. However, the DVF cast a significant number of negative votes indicating a lack of support for the promotion under consideration; the reasons for these negative votes are sometimes not apparent from the DVF summaries.

The URPTC does, however, recognize that the DVF summaries under question may actually be completely accurate; if no negative points were raised during the DVF discussions then the reports are indeed a faithful reflection of the discussions. Such instances are confounding, since the reasoning behind the negative votes is not apparent. Given that faculty voting is secret, the URPTC understands that such a situation may arise. However, the imbalance between positive DVF summaries and substantial negative votes indicate unspoken issues with regards to the particular RPT case at hand that may need to be brought to light.

The URPTC feels that it is important that candidate summaries – both at the DVF and college levels – reflect the range of opinions voiced during the RPT discussions. This is particularly important for candidates who have received a negative decision. Under POL05.20.05 Consultation and Written Assessments, Recommendations and Written Responses in RPT Review, Sec.4 indicates that the Candidate Response at key junctions provides for "... an opportunity for the candidate to offer clarification at the completion of each of the levels of review (departmental, college and university)". When the summaries do not reflect the true deliberations in its written assessment, it is difficult for a candidate to provide what may be important clarifications. Even when the RPT action is successful, a candidate knowing what led to negative votes represents important feedback allowing faculty to address issues and further excel.

Recommendation:

Summaries at the department and college levels should always reflect the RPT discussion as accurately as possible. Given the secret nature of DVF votes, it may not always be possible to rationalize the casting of a small number of isolated negative votes. However, if the number of negative votes is substantial (say approaching roughly 20%), it might be helpful for the Department Head letter to clarify and speculate as to the rationale behind such negative votes provided that the reasoning behind these negative votes is not otherwise apparent.

As a minor recommendation, DVF write ups should explicitly record the DVF vote distribution.

Response:

We agree that the complete range of observations expressed among the DVF and college committee about the quality and impact of the candidate's accomplishments should be documented in the written review. This not only helps other reviewers in the process but also the candidate, as noted. We have clearly stated this in the Consultation Regulation and in the Roles and Responsibilities Page under DVF member and CRPTC member.

We can share the recommendation with Department Heads that as a best practice when the negative vote tally reaches 20% and there is no context for the negative votes in the DVF summary, the Department Head should try to clarify the rationale in their assessment; however, we also understand why some Heads would be hesitate to speculate about negative votes in some cases. We would also encourage URPTC members to use their experiences on this committee to assist with this issue in their departments going forward.

(e) The Meaning of Success: Enhanced Mentoring for Junior Faculty

A significant portion of University status is centered on the reputation of its faculty, and so the fostering and growth of junior faculty is key towards maintaining the strength and viability of the University as a public institution. To that end, it is in the best interests of the University that its junior faculty receive appropriate mentoring at all stages in order to ensure success. In the past, the RPT process relied primarily on informal communications between junior and senior faculty/administrators to transmit community standards. More recently, NC State established and codified RPT policies which govern these processes and thereby reduce the dependence on *ad hoc* or informal means of communication. The URPTC believes that all aspects of the RPT process be transparent and visible to all its stakeholders; it is important that all criteria to be applied are known and understood by faculty undergoing evaluation.

To this end, the annual faculty review process is particularly important for junior faculty as it allows for the identification and transmission of explicit concerns and provides for the timely development and communication of strategies to remedy areas of concerns. The URPTC notes that NC State has been proactive in attracting culturally diverse candidates. It is particularly important that such candidates understand fully what is expected of them as early as possible, and that mismatches in expectations be minimized as much as possible. To that end, the explicit annual review process and targeted mentoring by other more senior faculty are

processes that are only to be encouraged and enhanced. Ideally, external letters aside, there should be “no surprises” in the outcome of any RPT action.

Implicit in the navigation of the RPT process is that every Department and College have a common understanding as to what constitutes success and excellence. The URPTC recognizes that this is an ongoing and dynamic process subject to change. Given the diversity of colleges within the University, it is natural that the metrics of what constitutes success are likely to differ between the departments and colleges; continued conversations with regards to these issues are to be encouraged. Discussions should center not only what constitutes success, but what also constitutes failure. No matter what the outcome, junior faculty should be informed of all aspects of such discussions, and there should be no doubt as to what is needed for a successful RPT action. If significant changes in the metrics for excellence are to be introduced, it is important that these be introduced on a timescale which allows faculty to naturally adjust; there should be no significant “shifting of goal posts” as faculty cycle through their way to promotion.

Recommendations: Departments and colleges should have or develop a clear understanding of what metrics constitute success, and that this be communicated to faculty in clear and timely manner; in some cases, this may entail extra effort in crossing “cultural divides” given the diversity of new junior faculty. Actions that promote the understanding of the RPT process at NC State are to be encouraged. It has been suggested that yearly panels designed to help junior faculty navigate the RPT process may be helpful.

Response:

The Provost’s Office through Dr. Carolyn Bird, former URPTC and Faculty Chair, is working on RPT programming that will help navigate the process for Underrepresented Minority (URM) faculty. In addition, the new faculty mentoring website provides resources for mentoring early career faculty in areas such as understanding tenure and evaluation, navigating career demands, developing professional networks and excelling at teaching and research. Thank you for this important recommendation. We will continue to examine ways to enhance our efforts in this regard.