

Thoughts on faculty rank

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The motivating question. What criteria should characterize a full, associate, or assistant professor at Murray State University? Of course, it is impossible for any framework to pin down precisely what such qualifications for faculty ranks should be, and there may be good reasons for wanting to maintain a little ambiguity. One positive view of having a more flexible design is that those evaluating a candidate for a particular rank then have room to make more subjective judgments in favor of a candidate whose fine accomplishments nonetheless fall outside of the purview of some well-intentioned but not all-encompassing framework. It also gives a candidate room to make an argument on his/her own behalf. Furthermore, excessive specificity could encroach upon academic freedom. On the other hand, an utterly vague arrangement would obviously erode faculty confidence in the fairness of the process.

What I'm trying to accomplish here. One goal of these notes is to help me clarify my own thinking about what the various faculty ranks mean, and in so doing perhaps resolve for myself the tension between ambiguity and specificity noted in the previous paragraph. I also hope this formulation of ideas will help me in talking with colleagues about standards for faculty evaluations in general and the promotion process in particular, something which is a little more serious for me now since I am a new member of my department's promotion committee. I might consider more vocally advocating these ideas within the department, college, and university, once I have a better sense of whether these ideas are "right" for us. *But for now, this should only be taken as an opinion about policy — it is not yet a proposal.*

The main new ideas offered here for the promotion process are (1) providing some new language for understanding and expressing standards for the evaluation of faculty performance and (2) formally stating how the disparity in the importance of research and service can be diminished. As I see it, only item (2) represents a deviation from current policy. Some of the ideas here are borrowed, but any offense that is taken should be directed at me.

Some preliminary remarks. Before stating my views on criteria and qualifications for the various faculty ranks, I'll offer a unifying concept for the role of faculty in higher education institutions like Murray State, speak briefly on the importance of research at Murray State, and share some general thoughts on evaluating faculty. But I'll start with a bit of personal history, for context.

A bit of recent personal history. In October of 2007, I submitted my application for promotion to full professor. That application was the culmination of many months of intense reflection and preparation. The experience was both stressful (I adopted as a mantra something a friend said once: I should keep in mind that I'd be free to do better work once the process was over) and beneficial (I am pleased with the resulting personal mission statement that I used to frame my argument in my application; the mounds of data I compiled on research productivity in mathematics will hopefully find its place in the literature someday; and I felt that I gained a broader view of my discipline and my profession). Through the process I changed my mind on some things (for example, the need for further specificity in our promotion guidelines and procedures up through the college level) and had my thinking reinforced on some others (that 'freedom to flourish', 'collegiality', and 'a priority for our discipline' should be core principles in our departmental life*). To some extent, the thoughts I offer here are an outgrowth of that experience. In particular, I have come to the following conclusion: the collegiality and freedom to flourish that we now enjoy are not sustainable without some frank conversations about standards for faculty evaluations. I hope this essay can serve as a good starting point.

*To me, 'freedom to flourish' is a certain flexibility individuals have in defining/pursuing their professional goals, and 'collegiality' is a spirit of promoting the general welfare of our department and valuing the many ways there are for people to succeed.

A unifying concept for the role of faculty. To borrow a phrase from a former colleague, a university professor could be called a “knowledge-worker”, as it can be reasonably argued that there are three main aspects to his/her work: (1) Imparting knowledge, (2) Generating knowledge, and (3) Facilitating the creation and dissemination of knowledge. These correspond roughly to the three areas that faculty labor is traditionally divided into: teaching, research, and service. It is worth noting that such knowledge-work is not an abstract exercise but rather is aimed at benefitting the community of students and faculty at this university. More broadly, such work should aim to impact upon the needs of the regional and state-wide constituency that we serve, the legacy we leave to future generations of students and scholars, and even the efforts of other knowledge-workers in related disciplines around the world. What’s more, faculty as knowledge-workers can be confident that they are exercising their patriotic duty, if the inscription on Pogue Library is to be believed: “The hope of democracy depends on the diffusion of knowledge.”

Some views on the importance of research. For what reasons should research – that is, generating knowledge – be a part of faculty labor? In my view there are two kinds of reasons.

The first group of reasons concern the practical effect of research for students and faculty at our university. Faculty who are engaged in scholarship serve as good examples to students by modelling and reflecting characteristics of the MSU graduate, such as engaging in independent thought, applying methodologies that academic disciplines employ to discover knowledge, demonstrating mastery of a chosen field, and valuing intellectual pursuit and continuous learning. (Ultimately, we want students to be practitioners capable of innovation, not simply regurgitators.) Further, faculty who make contributions to their disciplines can speak credibly to students and others about the standards in their disciplines and the directions their fields might be taking, and can perhaps even involve students in research. By making new contributions, faculty demonstrate in a very concrete way the vitality of their disciplines. Such activity can also keep faculty excited and motivated about their roles as knowledge-workers. All of these effects are consequences of being a good ambassador for one’s discipline. In addition, scholarly contributions enhance (in their own way) the reputation of the university regionally, nationally, and internationally. Any argument that seeks to circumvent the importance of research is obliged to show how these important effects can otherwise be realized.

The second group of reasons concern the intrinsic value of an academic discipline and more broadly the value of the human pursuit of knowledge. If a subject is worth knowing, and if knowledge of it is worth passing on, then it should be carefully tended. A subject can stagnate and obsolesce (for example, alchemy or phrenology), but research helps bind the historic importance of a subject to the present and the future. More to the point, research advances a discipline by discerning further connections and broader uses and deeper meanings and the bigger picture (although that picture is always only glimpsed opaquely). To the extent that we can make positive contributions in these directions, it seems that we are obliged to do so.

Some thoughts on evaluating faculty. Appointment at a particular rank is, necessarily, the outcome of some evaluation process. Perhaps the following observations might help offset some of the apprehension that seems to be to be a normal part of facing evaluation. First, the evaluation process should encourage reflection on one’s professional priorities and foster an attitude of responsibility for one’s departmental mission and that of the university. This means that those being evaluated should be energized rather than depleted by the process. It also means that even though Murray State is a regional public university, it is reasonable to believe that faculty can and should still be motivated toward excellence. (To me, it follows that we should want people to be willing to aim toward promotion to full professor and to see that promotion as an attainable goal.) Second, evaluators should recognize that “uniformity of input” is not a reasonable expectation. In particular, the achievements and contributions for a given individual will not necessarily be equally strong in the three areas of knowledge-work. Also, it must be recognized that no two individuals will look exactly the same. For example, individuals might pace themselves differently toward promotion to full professor,

some going up as early as possible and others waiting a while. In general, the evaluation process should recognize the value of diversity. Third and most important, an applicant seeking promotion to some higher rank should have both the freedom and the responsibility for making the case that his/her achievements and contributions warrant the appointment (articulating his/her priorities/goals and saying how those have been pursued/met). The process should be flexible enough to give a fair hearing to an applicant's argument.

What rank means. With these preliminary thoughts in mind, it is my opinion that faculty rank should recognize the achievements and contributions of faculty as knowledge-workers (particularly at Murray State) in the following way. (Below I offer connotative understandings of the italicized words in this paragraph.) An assistant professor should have *sound* performance in all three areas of teaching, research, and service. Early on in the appointment of an assistant professor, it may be the case that sound performance can only be inferred as potential that is evidenced by the individual's work elsewhere and by what little might have been observed at Murray State. But moving through the annual review process toward tenure, sound performance at MSU should be clearly observed. An associate professor should perform with *proficiency* in at least two of the three areas, including teaching, and have sound performance in the other area.* A full professor should have *meritorious* performance in at least two of the three areas, including teaching, and perform with proficiency in the other area.

What *sound*, *proficient*, and *meritorious* mean. Here I'll attempt to articulate what I think characterizes *sound*, *proficient*, and *meritorious* performance in each of the areas of teaching, research, and service. It is to be understood that in a given area, proficient performance should also meet the standard of sound performance, and similarly, meritorious performance should also be proficient. An evaluation outcome of "proficient" (respectively "meritorious") in a given area should be based on a view of the complete service record of at least five (respectively ten) years as well as a concrete sense of future performance.

Teaching:

- Sound: There is clear and generally uniform evidence of teaching effectiveness and of working well with students.
- Proficient: There is clear effort to positively engage and work with students both in and out of the classroom, and this effort has resulted in a well-documented record of quality outcomes.
- Meritorious: The individual has an outstanding and well-documented record of teaching effectiveness. There is strong evidence of high quality classroom instruction and of high quality work with students both in and out of the classroom. The individual has made other contributions to enhance teaching effectiveness at the university and/or across his/her discipline.

Research[†]:

- Sound: There is clear evidence of creditable scholarly contributions.
- Proficient: The individual has a substantive record of quality research and scholarly contributions that demonstrate a capability to advance his/her discipline.
- Meritorious: The individual has established a continuing and productive program of research. Engagement in such a program is demonstrated by a strong record of quality scholarship. Further, there is strong evidence of recognition of the positive impact of this program beyond the university.

*In my opinion, it is reasonable that an assistant professor whose performance is sound but not proficient in the areas of teaching, research, and service during the probationary period could be recommended for tenure if there is clear movement toward proficiency in teaching and at least one other area. That is, within the framework offered here, tenure without promotion to associate could be possible in some (hopefully rare) cases.

[†]These research expectations should be viewed on a scale that is appropriate for a regional public university.

Service:

- Sound: The individual has handled his/her fair share of service responsibilities to his/her department and to the university.
- Proficient: The individual has demonstrated leadership and has a visible presence in service efforts that support the academic mission of the university. The individual has engaged in other endeavors benefitting his/her department, the university, and the profession or the community.
- Meritorious: In addition, the individual has made a distinguished service contribution (or set of contributions) that has had/will have a broad or long-term impact on his/her departmental programs, the university, the community, or his/her discipline.

Some conclusions. The following are some clarifications of the framework offered here.

First, promotion to associate is not admitted without proficient teaching. Further, promotion to full cannot be attained without meritorious teaching. These principles reflect and underscore the importance of the teaching mission here at Murray State.

Second, in this framework meritorious research is not required for promotion to full, since it allows that meritorious teaching and proficient research together with meritorious service are sufficient for this promotion. Similarly, proficient research is not required for promotion to associate, since proficient teaching and service together with sound research are sufficient for this promotion. In either of these cases, and in view of the importance of research, such service should then be clearly seen to achieve some of the same beneficial effects of the comparable level of research as described on page two of this document (“some views on the importance of research”). This is consistent with the viewpoint of research and service as facets of the more general enterprise of knowledge-work. *I believe that these ideas – which diminish the disparity between the importance of research and service in promotion evaluations – are the only ideas offered here that are not consistent with current promotion policy. This is a change I support.*

Third, length of service is a factor in at least the following ways. First, an evaluation outcome of “proficient” (respectively “meritorious”) isn’t on the table until after five (respectively ten) years of professional experience. Moreover, this framework recognizes longevity of contributions made at Murray State in the following sense. Proficiency is something that can build over time, so there is a “path to promotion” to associate for the longtime assistant professor. Similarly, meritorious accomplishments can also build over time, although for promotion to full certain measures of distinction should also apply.