

American University
Department of Economics

Criteria for Tenure and Promotion

Approved by the Department Rank & Tenure Committee
July 27, 2016

The Department of Economics sets high standards for tenure and promotion in rank. In order to achieve tenure and promotion to associate professor, tenure-track faculty are expected to publish significant scholarly research, to attain high levels of teaching effectiveness, and to become good department citizens in terms of service. We also look for clear evidence of strong future potential for continued scholarly publications. Our service expectations are modest for junior faculty, but our expectation is that service contributions will increase after a positive tenure decision. In evaluating faculty for promotion to full professor, the department puts the greatest weight on excellence in scholarship, but also expects continued effectiveness in teaching and active participation in department, university, and professional service.

Scholarship

To be tenured or promoted in the department, the faculty member must demonstrate excellence in scholarship. As is the standard in doctoral departments in economics, this is measured primarily by output in peer-reviewed academic journals. There is no simple formula summarizing our criteria for scholarly excellence. Specifically, there is no “magic number” of journal articles that ensures tenure or promotion. However, certain general standards can be articulated.

The department is looking to grant tenure and promotion to associate professor for faculty who can raise the scholarly reputation of the department. To be promoted to full professor in the department, the faculty member must demonstrate a sustained and continuing record of excellence in scholarship and be nationally or internationally respected within his or her field of expertise. In reviewing a file for action, emphasis will be given to work completed while at American University. For faculty bringing substantial credit toward tenure, the balance can be adjusted accordingly.

The department encourages the highest level research and will evaluate the quality of peer reviewed publications. We place the greatest weight on highly ranked general-interest journals and the most highly ranked field journals. A handful of full-length articles placed in top journals may be sufficient for a positive evaluation. Nevertheless, the department recognizes that economists and journals are highly specialized today, and therefore publications in specialized field journals are also important outlets for high-impact scholarly research. Furthermore, given our desire to promote interdisciplinary scholarship, we understand that faculty pursuing interdisciplinary research will naturally find publication outlets in high-quality interdisciplinary journals. Although they are imperfect measures, the department uses a combination of commonly accepted journal rankings and impact factors to help determine the significance of the journals in which a candidate has published and the perceived quality of relatively new journals (although the department is also sensitive to lags in journal citations). While making its own judgment based on a reading of the candidate’s file, the department also relies on the evaluations of the anonymous external reviewers to assess the quality of the research.

To a lesser extent, the department also takes into account other publications such as books, invited articles, chapters in edited books or conference volumes, and government monographs or policy reports. Such publications will receive greater weight if they are peer reviewed or if the scholarly prestige of the publisher is high. These other types of scholarly contributions are considered more appropriate for tenured faculty seeking promotion to full professor (or the rare cases of associate professors being considered for tenure), especially if we judge that the publication of a book or invited work constitutes recognition of the significance of the individual's contributions by leading scholars in one's field. However, for promotion to full professor as well as for tenure and promotion to associate, the publication of substantial quality research in refereed journals, as defined above, remains the primary criterion in assessing scholarship.

In addition to the significance of the peer-reviewed outlets described above, the quality of a candidate's publications may be judged in several other ways. Such considerations may include published reviews of the candidate's work (especially for books), citations to the candidate's publications, and the work's impact on public policy formation. Given the delays in citations appearing in print, we understand that relatively few citations may be available at the time of a tenure decision but we would expect more at the time of promotion to full professor.

The department looks for evidence of capability of independent research. However, there is no expectation that all or even most publications will be single-authored. Co-authorship has become increasingly common in economics today, especially because of the need to combine different specialized talents (e.g., knowledge of theory, econometrics, and policy issues) in order to produce a given piece of scholarship. Thus, co-authored scholarship may be an important part of a candidate's file for tenure or promotion, but the department will seek to evaluate the level of contribution by the candidate in the co-authored publications.

Although they are not "counted" as actual scholarship for a tenure or promotion decision, certain other activities may be important in our assessment of the likelihood of continued future scholarship. The indicators of a strong future research trajectory may include presenting papers at academic and professional conferences, having papers under review at peer-reviewed journals, and assessment by the department and external reviewers of the quality of working papers. For tenure candidates, we especially look for evidence that the candidate's research is moving in the direction of new topics or areas beyond the focus of the initial publications, especially if the latter were based on the individual's doctoral dissertation. Professional honors or awards received by the faculty member in recognition of his or her accomplishments may also serve to document outstanding contributions in scholarship.

External grants can be a significant means for faculty at all ranks to enhance their research productivity as well as to demonstrate professional recognition of their scholarly achievements and potential. Depending on the degree to which external funding is commonly available in a candidate's subfield of specialization, obtaining significant external funding may be given a greater or lesser weight in a tenure or promotion decision. We do not require all candidates for tenure or promotion to win significant external funding, but we view it as a very positive factor when candidates do succeed in winning them.

Teaching

Teaching is central to the department's and university's missions and thus plays a prominent role in tenure and promotion decisions. To be considered for tenure and/or promotion, a faculty member must demonstrate effectiveness in the classroom. Evidence from Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs), although imperfect, nevertheless provides an important gauge of teaching performance. The department reviews these quantitative measures carefully. Recognizing that many junior faculty members are undertaking full classroom responsibilities for the first time when they join the AU faculty (and even experienced professors may find the AU student body to be different from students elsewhere), the department looks not only at the statistical means of the SETs but also at the full distribution of the responses to particular questions and whether there is a trend of improvement after a faculty member's arrival at AU. Other contexts, such as the challenges faced by faculty teaching large sections or general education courses, courses that represent new preparations, or certain difficult (required) courses, are taken into account in evaluating the SETs. The department also considers the richness of the syllabus, the level of engagement that takes place in the classroom, and other factors that enhance active learning.

The department seeks other evidence of good teaching. Comments by students, teaching fellows, and colleagues who have shared a classroom, served on a dissertation committee, or shared other teaching experiences, as well as awards for teaching excellence, also strengthen the candidate's case. New courses or programs developed by the candidate, innovative pedagogical approaches in the classroom, teaching Honors colloquia, interdisciplinary collaboration in teaching, efforts to promote student research, mentoring students who apply for prestigious merit awards, and special lectures given to a broad audience of faculty, students, and others also provide evidence of skills inherent in excellent teaching. If the department considers other evidence insufficient, the Rank and Tenure Committee may recommend classroom visitations by senior faculty to obtain more information on the candidate's teaching performance.

Classroom teaching is only one part of a faculty member's teaching duties. Contact with students outside the traditional classroom setting is a factor in evaluating teaching. Organizing seminars, colloquia, conferences, supervising theses and independent studies, and advising of students are important types of teaching. Frequent and active presence on campus is crucial to all of these endeavors. Given the importance of the doctoral program to the department as well as the university's emphasis on promoting student research in the Strategic Plan, doctoral dissertation supervision is an especially important component of teaching, and service on dissertation committees (either as the chair or a member) will be given significant weight in evaluating teaching.

Ideally, a faculty member should be highly successful in the full range of teaching levels: introductory courses offered primarily for non-majors (usually these are General Education classes in economics), upper-level undergraduate courses for economics majors and majors in related disciplines, master's level courses, and doctoral courses. However, individual faculty members usually have particular strengths for different levels of students or types of courses, and department needs often dictate specialization. As we teach our students in every introductory course in economics, relying on the concept of comparative advantage can lead to better outcomes for everyone. Nonetheless there is an expectation that a faculty member should demonstrate effectiveness in teaching in both graduate and undergraduate courses. All faculty are expected to be flexible in accepting teaching assignments in response to department needs (subject to a reasonable number of separate preparations), even if their research becomes specialized in other directions.

Service

It is important that candidates for tenure and promotion integrate themselves into the university community. Although the department is the center of a professor's institutional life, some of the great joys of an academic position include the ability to share ideas across disciplinary boundaries and to contribute to the enhancement of the university community as a whole. Faculty at all ranks are expected to be active department citizens and should exhibit a cooperative attitude toward sharing in service obligations. This is reflected, for example, in attendance at department meetings and events, serving on department committees, and sharing responsibilities for advising, comprehensive exam grading, attending commencement and other university events as an ambassador for the department, etc. While an individual is on tenure track, however, expectations for formal service beyond the department are minimal. Pre-tenured faculty may be occasionally asked to participate in service beyond the department and are especially encouraged to assist in programmatic collaboration with other teaching units or schools if this is important for their teaching fields. A limited amount of service participation at the college and university level may be appropriate as the faculty member gets closer to the tenure review date. Tenured faculty seeking promotion to full professor are expected to have participated in a wider range of service activities at the college or university level and/or to have increased their level of responsibility or leadership within the department (for example, by chairing a committee or serving as a program director). Service in mentoring junior faculty is also taken into account for tenured associate professors seeking promotion to full professor.

We also expect that our faculty will engage in external service in the economics profession and the policy world, but this is expected to be very limited while on tenure track and to increase after an individual has been granted tenure. Examples of professional service activities include: refereeing papers for journals; service on editorial boards or as journal editors; organizing professional conferences or panels at scholarly meetings; serving as a reviewer for grants or fellowships; and leadership positions in professional organizations. However, service activities are never the primary basis for a decision about tenure or promotion. Candidates for tenure and promotion are therefore advised to keep service, both internal and external, within bounds that permit their primary energies to be devoted to scholarship and teaching.