COMMENTARY

P&T and Me

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Very few occasions bring more stress to a faculty member than the promotion and/or tenure (P&T) process. In this commentary, two recent chairs of P&T committees give their advice to future petitioners. Subtopics of the editorial discuss knowing the expectations, finding mentors to guide you, understanding the role of peer reviewers and preparing your dossier.

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A wise mentor once said that if you want to get the attention of a room full of faculty members, just mention P&T, and a silence will fall over the room with all eyes forward. For assistant professors, the P&T process can generate more trepidation and anxiety than anything else in their careers. The authors have served as chairs of their respective program's P&T committees and have either recently completed or are within a year of their own P&T reviews. Our goal is to demystify the process for future P&T petitioners. In the sections that follow, we offer some advice on preparing you for the process.

First, it is important to distinguish between tenure and non-tenure (promotion only) reviews. Some faculty members will have the opportunity to choose to follow the tenure track or take a non-tenure (often clinical) track. Generally, the review process is similar for both types of reviews, and the merits that are presented and discussed for each of the reviews are similar. However, there are important differences between promotion reviews and tenure reviews; the first of which is "the clock." Tenure reviews generally follow an "up or out" model, where the faculty member is required to undergo a review after a certain amount of time. In contrast, at approximately 80% of pharmacy programs, non-tenure track faculty members can choose if or when they would like to undergo a promotion review to associate professor.¹ This freedom of choice may mitigate the stressfulness of the review to a degree and hopefully allow for the review to be

performed when the petitioner and the department chair or dean all feel the petitioner is ready.

Regardless of the stakes, there is the inherent anxiety that can come from submitting your accomplishments for judgment by your peers, both inside and outside of your program. How can junior faculty members be confident that they meet the criteria for a successful outcome?

Know the Expectations

Each university will have different guidelines and philosophies on the criteria that are used for the review. From the time you start your faculty position, you should be well-versed in the criteria. In some ways, the P&T review is a checklist, but the process still relies on a strong narrative to support the checklist and allows you to add context to the P&T criteria that are not obvious. For example, if you are told you need two publications to be promoted, what does that mean? Two senior author publications? Two coauthor publications? Do they have to be in the scholarship of discovery or is educational research equally valued? Does a publication mean a manuscript, or are posters and abstracts acceptable? This is just one example of the vagueness that may occur within the promotion and/or tenure guidelines, so it is important that you understand the expectations at the outset. If you need to be a senior author, you may want to be leery of spreading yourself too thin with collaborations. If you can be a co-author, use this to your advantage and establish numerous collaborations that would hopefully result in an increased number of publications.

Take care to plan your career by setting expectations and goals every year and articulating how the expectations and goals move you toward meeting P&T criteria. Do you need to be involved in a university-wide committee? Do you need to chair a college- or department-level

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committee? What steps can you make to ensure you meet these goals? Finally, know the criteria that are most valued and how your position fits into these criteria. One study found pharmacy practice faculty in tenure-track positions are expected to have twice as many publications compared to clinical-track faculty, whereas clinical positions will have ~40% effort toward clinical practice, with the majority spending at least three days a week there.¹ If you are faculty at a teaching-centered institution, your contributions in the classroom, peer reviews of teaching, student evaluations, and efforts in precepting students on rotations may ultimately take on the greatest importance. Obviously, achieving the criteria in the other pillars of academia is essential, but promotion and especially tenure decisions are made with the institution's mission and values in mind. Make sure your contributions and efforts in each area are consistent with what your peers and institution are doing, unless you have a mitigating circumstance, such as serving as an administrator or having a split-funded position.

Does your program offer a midpoint promotion review? These reviews allow a faculty member to receive feedback on their progress toward promotion and (or) tenure halfway before they are required to submit. It can be a valuable measure of where you have succeeded, if you are on track, and what areas you may need to focus your attention in the upcoming years.

Find Guiding Mentors

Having a fruitful mentor-mentee relationship can make or break the P&T process for a faculty member. A trustworthy and reliable mentor can alleviate the stress and trepidation associated with the process by helping you set goals for your career and by providing critical introductions and novel opportunities in the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service. A mentor also can provide advice on difficult situations that can help you in your career and open doors for you in national organizations and committees. There are endless benefits to engaging a mentor, but finding a mentor can be challenging. First, start within your own program. Look to senior faculty members whom you admire, and ask for their advice. Ask for advice about things you think you know about, for example: "How would you grade this test question?" or "What do you do when a student in your laboratory makes a mistake?" etc. Establishing a rapport with senior faculty members makes it easier to go to them with the more difficult questions when they arise. It also helps to create an ally that you can rely on for help with dossier preparation – an ally who has presumably gone through the same process at your institution. Also, ask mentors within your program to provide an example of their dossier and to review your dossier once it is drafted. An internal

mentor can help to shape your dossier to best fit your institution, thereby increasing the likelihood for success.

It is also important to have mentors outside of your institution. Mentors who are external to your program can provide alternative points of view that are not marred by institutional bias or the political landscape of your institution. External mentors also can help to establish multi-institutional collaborations or provide avenues for you to become involved in national organizations. To find an external mentor, start by attending and participating in national meetings. If you have data, present a poster and talk to people at your posters. If you don't have data, sit next to strangers at presentations and/or business meetings and introduce yourself. Always attend social events at the meetings, like the opening or closing ceremonies, and introduce yourself. When you get home, follow up with the people you met. The follow-up could be anything regarding the conversation that you had with your future mentor. For example: "When you were at my poster, you mentioned a paper I should read. What was that paper again?" If you can't attend a meeting, there are other ways to get involved in national organizations; for instance, several AACP sections have mentoring programs that you can join or you can volunteer to serve on a section committee and meet individuals that way. Use AACP Connect to explore what your section offers, and participate in programming that interests you or that you want to learn more about.

No one goes through this process alone. In fact, it is impossible to complete the dossier alone. All completed dossiers will have peer review, and the strongest dossiers will have letters of support from peers. Start cultivating mentorship relationships early, and don't be afraid or embarrassed to ask for help with your P&T process. Mentors are there to help.

Understanding the Role of Peer Reviewers

The purpose of peer reviewers varies for pharmacy programs, so it is important to understand how peer review fits into your program's process. Most often, the committee relies on peer reviews to provide an outside opinion regarding the dossier. A common challenge among P&T committees is that the committee itself may not have a colleague who has shared scholarly expertise with the applicant, therefore scholarly contributions can be difficult to evaluate. An outside reviewer can provide expert opinion regarding the quality of scholarship that the applicant has produced. There are metrics like impact factor and h-index, but these are imperfect and tend to favor older scholarship vs newly published manuscripts. Therefore, the P&T committee or your department chair may ask you for suggestions regarding peer reviewers, or may select experts in

your field, to review your dossier. If allowed, contact the individuals you are considering and let them know that they may be asked to provide a peer review of your dossier. Peer review requires time, and a small warning can help reviewers plan their own schedules and allow them to carve out the time needed to be able to accept your request.

Peer reviewers may be asked to use the criteria at their own institution to review your dossier. If you are asked to provide a list of reviewers, it is extremely important that you are aware of the criteria a reviewer will be using. Use great caution in choosing reviewers who are at a program different from your own. For example, if you are at a teaching intensive institution, you may not want to ask a colleague at a research intensive program to review your dossier. Instead, if you would like a colleague at a research intensive program to support your dossier, consider asking for a letter of support to add to your dossier, laying out your contributions to the field. That can be an effective way of demonstrating your successes in scholarship.

Beyond the external reviewers, programs often have internal reviews as well. At some institutions, the petitioner is reviewed by every faculty member within their department at the rank of associate professor or higher. In other scenarios, the only members of the department are those who serve on the promotion and tenure committee and then the committee may request reviews from other faculty within the university. These reviewers can be useful to speak to about scholarship, but also about teaching and service, especially if you performed meaningful teaching in a course outside of the pharmacy curriculum or if you spearheaded an initiative at the university level.

Each peer reviewer is important, and they take a lot of time and care in their reviews. If you provide names of potential reviewers, consider what your relationship is and what you'd expect the person to focus on. You may want to use reviewers who would focus on different aspects of your dossier (teaching vs scholarship etc.), or if you have an area you are more concerned about, try to have reviewers who can help support your accomplishments where you feel weakest.

Preparing the Dossier

The preparation of the dossier can be overwhelming and seem insurmountable, but it is also a good opportunity for self-reflection on your many accomplishments. Start preparing your dossier early, 6-9 months before it is due, because putting together the dossier will take more time than you think. Also, schedule planned time away from dossier preparation to let your thoughts marinate and create/compose a strong narrative with supporting documents.

The key to a strong dossier is organization, and having your accomplishments well-organized will ensure you can highlight all of them appropriately. The contents of each dossier will vary between programs, but there will likely be narratives and appendices or supplemental material. The appendices and supplemental materials support the narrative by providing the tangible evidence that is discussed within the narrative. Starting the process by gathering supplemental material can help you organize your accomplishments and may even remind you of events that were not at the forefront of your mind. Create a folder (paper and/or electronic) early in your career in which you place items such as peer evaluations, letters of thanks or commendation, or awards so that you can easily gather these materials for your appendix.

Once you have gathered and organized all of your materials, you can begin to draft outlines for your narratives. The best narratives tell the story of you, your accomplishments and, importantly, your impact on your students and your program. For some faculty members, storytelling prose flows naturally; for others, it can be more challenging. A good tip for a first draft is to imagine actually telling your story to someone. Some faculty members have purchased voice recognition software for which to dictate their story. However, the story must be a realistic analysis of your activity. Be wary of overstating or embellishing your accomplishments. Your dossier will be reviewed primarily by your peers and your chair, who are generally aware of your accomplishments, as well as the accomplishments of others. Do not take full credit for something that was a team effort, and acknowledge the collaborative efforts of others in your statements. No one wants to work with an individual who does not acknowledge the collaborative efforts of their teams.

Be practical as you consider the space limitations of your dossier, and always keep the objective in mind, which is a successful review. For example, if you have a ratings system of competent, proficient, and excellent, and you are required to be proficient in two areas and competent in a third, make that your goal. The P&T review is a pass/fail course. Many faculty members get caught up describing why they should be excellent in teaching (or research), using the large majority of space to prove this and, in turn, shortchange another area where they are not as passionate. Make sure to dedicate enough time and space to each area in which you are ranked, and support yourself as much as possible in weaker areas. Remember, having a rating of excellent in one area would be of little consolation if your overall application is not successful.

Within your dossier, be sure to address the expectations for what you are applying for. While it may feel like

the end of a long journey, the tenure or first promotion review is likely closer to the start of your independent career than the end of it. Discuss your future plans and how you plan to continue to grow. What are your short-term goals beyond this review? Longer term? While promotion, and especially tenure, are rewards to you, they are an investment and commitment on behalf of the university, so be cognizant of their expectation that you will continue to bring exceptional performance to the university.

Within the final drafts of your dossier, begin to explicitly draw connections between your narrative and your program's P&T guidelines. For instance, if the guidelines state that you must "display a consistent record of positive peer and/or supervisor reviews and learner evaluations," discuss peer, supervisor, and student reviews that support this statement. Then provide the proof of your consistent records in the form of the reviews. Most importantly, state "this demonstrates the P&T criteria for having a consistent record of positive peer and/or supervisor reviews and learner evaluations." The onus is on the petitioner to prove he or she is worthy of P&T, so helping reviewers make connections with the P&T guidelines will strengthen the dossier.

Your dossier also will be viewed by outside reviewers who likely are not going to be familiar with the inner workings of your dossier. For example, petitioners at Western New England University College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences are asked to provide a sample syllabus, sample assessment, sample student evaluation, and sample peer evaluation in the main dossier with additional material added to the appendix. There's nothing wrong

with that, and the P&T committee won't question why you provided that information, but it may seem odd to an external reviewer unless you include a table of contents or a section introductory page that explains why this material was chosen. So take some effort when organizing your dossier to ensure it can be understood by those outside your program as well.

In Closing

The only real comparator to submitting your dossier might be submitting a PhD thesis for those faculty who have done so, or a midpoint dossier if your institution requires one. It is a herculean effort, and it feels very inefficient. However, similar to a PhD thesis or midpoint dossier, it is the culmination of all of your independent accomplishments and hopefully evokes a great sense of pride in the contributions to your program and your discipline that you have made. While the waiting can be quite stressful, with true self-reflection, and with the help of your chairs and other senior department members, you should have a good idea whether your submission will be successful or not. At faculty orientations, the provost would always say P&T decisions should not be a surprise. So submit your dossier, preferably early, reflect for a day on your previous accomplishments, and then get back to the job you enjoy so much that you created that monstrous dossier to keep it.

REFERENCE

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