Success Strategies for Tenure-Track Faculty
Faculty Professional Development session on September 20, 2004
Summary of panelists’ remarks
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Introduction/Overview

This document provides a summary of remarks made by panelists at “Success Strategies for Tenure-Track Faculty,” a Faculty Professional Development session held on September 20, 2004. Panelists represented a broad spectrum of departments, roles within the School of Medicine, and areas of expertise. They were therefore able to bring a wide variety of perspectives to bear on issues important to tenure-track faculty. These perspectives are captured in the pages that follow.

Please bear in mind that faculty coming up for promotion on the tenure track will have distinct issues pertaining to their individual situations. No single formula guarantees success to all faculty. The School of Medicine Committee on Appointments and Promotions (COAP) considers candidates individually, focusing on each faculty member’s unique achievements.

Panelists

David A. Asch, M.D., M.B.A., Professor of Medicine; Executive Director, Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics.

Robert W. Doms, M.D., Ph.D., Professor of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine; Chair, Department of Microbiology.

Glen N. Gaulton, Ph.D., Professor of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine; Vice Dean for Research and Research Training.

Ann R. Kennedy, D.Sc., Professor of Radiation Biology in the Department of Radiation Oncology; Richard Chamberlain Professor of Research Oncology.

Victoria A. Mulhern, Executive Director, Faculty Affairs & Professional Development.

Reed E. Pyeritz, M.D., Ph.D., Professor of Medicine and Genetics; Chief, Division of Medical Genetics; Chair, COAP.

Amita Sehgal, Ph.D., Professor or Neuroscience.
Part I: The Road to Success

Timeline

Basic scientists vs. physician scientists

You will come up for review according to one of two timelines. If you are a basic scientist with no clinical responsibilities, your probationary period is seven years, with mandatory review during the sixth year of your appointment. In some situations, your department may decide to put you up for early promotion.

If you have clinical responsibilities, the School recognizes that you will need additional time to produce the scholarship expected of faculty on the tenure track, and your probationary period is ten years, with mandatory review during the ninth year of your appointment. To find out exactly when you are due to come up for review, take a look at the letter of appointment that you signed and returned to your department chair. If you did not save a copy, please contact your departmental faculty coordinator to determine the year of your mandatory review.

Extensions to Timeline

Certain situations permit you to extend your probationary period. Currently, these situations are the same as those that apply under the federal Family Medical Leave Act, and include the birth of a child, foster care or adoption, your own serious illness, or the serious illness of a family member or domestic partner. The precise language of the extension policy is available in the University Handbook for Faculty and Administrators which you can access on line at www.upenn.edu/assoc-provost/handbook in Section II.E.3 Policy on Extension of the Probationary Periods that Apply to Granting of Tenure or Promotion to Associate Professor. If an extension is approved, then the faculty member’s mandatory review year will be adjusted to include the extension to their current appointment.
**Q:** Won't the Committee on Appointments and Promotions view me less favorably if I apply for an extension?

**A:** Absolutely not. Requests for extensions are commonplace. If you request one, COAP will not view you any differently from other candidates for reappointment or promotion. If you think you may want an extension, for example, if you are anticipating the birth of a child, make sure to apply for it within the year following your child’s birth. You should take advantage of this opportunity to extend your probationary period. The request will not injure your prospects for promotion, and you can always opt not to use the extension if you decide you do not need it. If you wish to apply for an extension, the first step is to submit a written request to your department chair.

Also accessible in the *Handbook* is the “reduction in duties” policy. According to this policy, you may request a “reduced schedule” subject to approval by your chair, the dean and the provost. Unlike part-time status which is available to staff but does not allow them to participate in the full menu of University benefits, a reduced schedule allows faculty to continue to participate in the full range of benefits.

If your reduced schedule is approved, you may work at a percentage of full-time effort for up to six years. If you agreed to work 50% of a full-time schedule for a period of two years, then you would qualify for a one-year extension of your probationary period. Reduced schedules are permitted for up to 3 years maximum.

**Plan Ahead!**

If you are considering a reduced schedule for a relatively short period of time, say for two years or less, make sure that you think you will be able to maintain adequate scholarly productivity on such a schedule. Note that COAP will review you at the standard time and according to the standard guidelines for all tenure track faculty, whether or not you have been working at a reduced schedule – unless you have been working 50% for two years as stated above and have an approved extension.
The Review Process

The review process for reappointment and the review process for promotion are similar. In both cases, you will be reviewed at three successive administrative levels. First, your departmental Committee on Appointments and Promotions (COAP) will review your CV and other documentation. If they vote to recommend you for reappointment or promotion, they will send a recommendation to the School COAP. If the School COAP votes in favor of your reappointment or promotion, they will, in turn, send their recommendation to the Dean. For reappointment, a small conference of deans’ designees and other University administrators meets to review you. For promotion, the Provost’s Staff Conference, a large conference of the deans of the major schools at Penn, meets to review you.
Part II: Reaching the Milestones

**Reappointment**

Do not wait until Year Three for feedback. Make sure you meet with your chair or division chief as well as with your mentor at least once a year to review your progress. That way, you will be more likely to succeed when you arrive at the major milestones – reappointment and promotion. If your chair does not schedule a meeting, take the initiative yourself. Bring a list of questions, and ask for direct and honest feedback.

**What does COAP expect?**

**Basic Scientists – Year Three**

No hard-and-fast guidelines dictate whether or not you will be reappointed at Year Three; however, typically, the departmental and School COAPs will be reassured that you are on a good trajectory if you are transitioning toward independence. You should continue the scholarly activity needed to round out the thoughts you had as a postdoctoral fellow, but the number of publications with your post-doc mentor’s name should be dwindling. Ideally, you will already have a paper with you as first author and another on the way. At the very least, you should be able to visualize papers coming out of your research. This means that it may be a problem if you are still developing your systems. They should be established by now, and you should be emerging as an independent investigator.

Lack of evidence of either academic independence or an independent and continuous stream of funding are the two most common concerns COAP members may have concerning a faculty member’s progress at Year Three. However, this does not mean that COAP expects you to have an R01 in hand at this early stage in your career. Rather, they are looking for any evidence of funding, period. COAP recognizes that it takes time to start from ground zero and generate enough preliminary data to apply for an R01. Therefore, they will view other grants favorably, including VA merit awards, K awards, and foundation grants.

**Physician scientists – Year Three**

Like their counterparts in the basic sciences, tenure-track faculty with clinical responsibilities should be demonstrating increasing independence by the time they come up for their first reappointment; however, their departmental COAPs usually recognize that the amount of time physician-scientists need to get up to speed varies widely according to the kind of research they perform. For example, gathering survey data for
epidemiological studies may require more time than is needed for performing research using some animal models.

The third-year review is primarily focused on making sure you are on track. For example, it can be very helpful in sending a signal to your chair that your other responsibilities are interfering with your success, or a message to you that you need to accelerate your productivity. Or, it can provide reassurance that things are going fine.

**Physician Scientists only – Year Six**

The third-year review is all about helping you. The sixth-year review is also about helping you, but there is now more information, and the review is more critical. The committee wants to see evidence that you are advancing in your career. They will be looking for a continuous record of productivity. Without comments from external reviewers, they will look for other clues from your record of publications, presentations, and grants. A good publication record shows increasing productivity over time, publication in leading journals, and a substantial proportion of first-authored publications. Work principally identified with more senior mentors should be waning, and more last-authored publications should be appearing. A good presentation record includes invited presentations at national meetings, and also at peer institutions. A good grant record shows a transition from career development funding (K awards and the like) to R01 and VA Merit funding as principal investigator. There are no clear quantitative guidelines for any of these elements, and not all of these elements need to be in place at this time, but the entire picture should be one that tells a story that points to independent scholarly leadership within the next three years.

**Advisory Letters**

Each faculty member who comes before the School of Medicine COAP is reviewed individually by the entire committee. Some candidates appear to be on track and generate virtually no discussion while others generate considerable discussion. Typically, COAP’s concerns relate to lack of productivity in one or more areas. For example, faculty may be spending too much time on committee and administrative work and need to shift their priorities to publishing. In these situations, COAP sends advisory letters to department chairs. Chairs must discuss the content of these letters with the faculty in question and submit documentation that they have done so to the Faculty Affairs and Professional Development office.
Q: If I get an advisory letter, should I conclude that I probably won’t succeed as a faculty member here?

A: No. Advisory letters represent COAP’s effort to steer you toward success. COAP issues these letters as a way of alerting you to problems while you still have time to remediate them. In other words, at reappointment, COAP is your advocate. By way of contrast, when you come up for promotion, COAP puts the School’s interests first.

Connecting with Other Faculty

“Working as a hermit in isolation is not good for you. You won’t have the opportunity to work on collaborations that may substantively improve your scholarship.” – David Asch

So far the emphasis of this discussion has been on the importance of establishing your independence as a scholar. Yet this does not mean that you should work in isolation. As a matter of fact, our faculty report that one of the main reasons they want to stay at Penn is that they enjoy the collegial relationships the School provides. Some of these relationships may result in fruitful collaborations. The benefits of collaborating are numerous and include the following:

- Working as a collaborator on someone else’s R01 is a good way to get funding while you are writing your first application as a PI on an R01.

- Pulling in a more senior person to fill in a gap in expertise when you apply for your own R01 often convinces NIH study sections that you have surveyed your field and are pulling in the top investigators, thereby assembling the strongest team and avoiding any duplication of efforts that have already taken place in your field.

- Collaborators at any stage in their careers can enrich your research by supplying other perspectives on problems and by serving as sounding boards to help you refine your own ideas.

All this being said, establishing collaborative relationships can be tricky in a culture that puts a premium on independent investigators. In academic institutions, junior faculty and their colleagues engage in a constant dance between both parties’ interdependency and their need to advance their own interests. Recognize that you are not alone in navigating these relationships.

One strategy for establishing good collaborative relationships is to be on the alert for colleagues who enjoy working with you or in other ways stand to gain as much from working with you as you do from working with them. And define early on who will be
responsible for what and who will be first author and senior author on papers. By doing so, you are likely to avoid tugs-of-war later on.

**Q:** If senior authors appear on all my papers, is there a danger that my work won’t be recognized as my own?

**A:** Having senior authors on papers is fine, but if it is the same senior author on all of your papers, people will question your independence. In the end, it has to be clear to an external audience that you ‘own’ your work and that you are responsible for a scholarly contribution.

The same conflict between interdependency and the need to establish independence can occur with mentors. And the same strategy pertains. Seek out mentors who stand to gain from working with you at the same time that you stand to gain from working with them. Perhaps you can contribute a unique expertise to their lab, and they, in turn, can guide you to think of problems from new angles or introduce you to the key players in your field of academic expertise. However, your mentor is not automatically entitled to put his or her name on all your papers as senior author. Although a good mentoring relationship involves give and take, both parties should recognize that your career is the priority.

**Mentors**

“Diversifying sources of advice is a good strategy.” – David Asch

A recent work-climate survey of faculty in the School of Medicine demonstrated a strong association between the number of mentors faculty had and their general satisfaction with their work lives – the greater the number of mentors they had, the greater their satisfaction. One mentor will not be able to provide you with the full picture of what it takes to succeed. Therefore, the best strategy is to diversify your sources of advice.

Think about the different kinds of information you need and identify faculty – not only within the School, but also within the broader Penn community, and at other institutions – who can provide this information. One person may be able to guide you on the current realities of what it takes to get promoted on the tenure track and to offer you advice on where to focus your energy – for example, this project is a quick hit, while that one will simply sap your time. Another person may be able to help you understand where your area of biomedical expertise is headed and how to carve out your own niche. This person might also be good at critiquing your grants and papers. Yet another person can provide advice on balancing work with the rest of your life. Based on his or her own experiences, a junior colleague may also be good at identifying the “go to” senior faculty in your division or department for various kinds of mentoring. Faculty who have recently been promoted can serve as excellent sources of information and moral support to their junior
colleagues who are coming up for promotion. You may want to search the Faculty Expertise Database System (FEDS) at [www.med.upenn.edu/apps/faculty](http://www.med.upenn.edu/apps/faculty) to identify potential mentors. Make sure to keep your own information on FEDS current so that others may seek you out as well.

**Promotion**

**Year Six (Basic Scientists) or Year Nine (Physician Scientists)**

“It’s okay to be nervous. I think I lost about 10 or 15 pounds the year I came up. Roll over the waves. Try to turn your anxiety into positive motivating force.” – Glen Gaulton

**What does COAP expect?**

The published guidelines that COAP uses to review candidates for promotion to associate professor on the tenure track follow here:

“Candidates must have a national reputation for outstanding independent work in their area of scholarship. A series of peer-reviewed articles in respected journals should tell a coherent story about their research. The successful candidate will have independent research grant support, usually from NIH or NSF. Membership in research societies, regular presentations at national meetings, and invited lectureships indicate the importance of the individual's research and his/her national reputation. The candidate should have a record of excellence in teaching medical and graduate students. Those who are involved in patient care are expected to be excellent clinicians.”

Often faculty are anxious for more quantitative guidelines; however, hard numbers would work to their disadvantage. The flexibility in numbers allows COAP to consider each case individually.

More important than the sheer number of papers on your CV is their impact in your field and whether they demonstrate focus by “telling a coherent story.” It is helpful to have two R01s when you come up for promotion, along with another grant on the way. This may be a foundation grant or a VA grant. If you have one grant, COAP may wonder whether you will sustain funding support. The important takeaway here is that COAP would like some reassurance that you will have a steady stream of funding into the foreseeable future.
**Letters from external reviewers**

“Rather than thinking, ‘Who’s going to write me the best letter?’ think, ‘Who are the experts in my field whose opinions of me will matter most?’” – Victoria Mulhern

A reputation for scholarly independence is the most important qualification for promotion, and letters from external consultants or referees are key here. You can view the standard letter to external referees on the Faculty Affairs and Professional Development web site at [http://somapps.med.upenn.edu/fapd/documents/fa00003.doc](http://somapps.med.upenn.edu/fapd/documents/fa00003.doc) Note that all letters to external reviewers state that the University expects faculty who are promoted to associate professor to be “Mature scholars … whose presence on the faculty enhances the prestige of the University.” A strong letter from a referee will say something like, “This candidate changed the way we look at the field. When I think of the top five people in this field, I would rate her as Number Two.”

In addition to letters from external reviewers which are solicited by the School of Medicine, your department will also solicit at least three letters from reviewers who can attest to your scholarship, your teaching and administrative accomplishments, and your clinical expertise if relevant.

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**Q: Given how important letters are, what can I do to cultivate potential letter writers?**

**A:** You can make yourself known to potential letter writers in your field in the following ways:

* **Serve on study sections.**

  If given the opportunity, take it. Serving on a study section offers you the opportunity to demonstrate the clarity of your scientific reasoning to prominent scholars in your field.

* **Give invited lectures.**

  Call your friends at universities around the country and offer to give a talk on your research at their institutions or at conferences they are organizing. You may want to strike up a deal: “If you invite me, I’ll invite you.”

* **Meet with visiting scholars.**

  Identify the top names in your area of biomedical expertise and see whether your department would be willing to invite them to Penn. When people in your field do come, take the first step. Call up the seminar organizer and ask whether you can get some face-time with the visiting scholar.
Q: What input will I have in choosing external reviewers?

A: According to University guidelines, your department chair will choose 8 reviewers. You will choose 3. When choosing or suggesting referees, remember that University guidelines are strict. Letter writers must be unbiased and impartial. Therefore, the use of collaborators and coauthors is extremely limited. Better choices are scholars who served on a study section with you or who heard you speak at a conference.

Letters represent a small but critical fraction of the documents that will appear in your dossier when you come up for promotion. Remember that your complete dossier will, in effect, speak for you when you come before the members of the promotions committee, so no matter where you are in your career, you should start thinking about preparing a dossier that will make the strongest possible case for your promotion. A brief guide to preparing your dossier is available on the Faculty Affairs and Professional Development web site www.med.upenn.edu/fapd/fpd. [Click on the word Search in the upper right-hand corner and enter “Promotion Process Guide” (in quotes) into the search box.]

The FAPD office invites you to contact us for guidance on promotion standards and processes. Other good sources of guidance are your chair, your chief if applicable, your mentors, your departmental COAP chair, School of Medicine COAP members, and colleagues who have recently been promoted.
Resources

FAPD website  www.med.upenn.edu/fapd  This site contains a number of documents pertinent to promotion on the tenure track, including the School of Medicine standards for promotion, a sample of the letter that is sent to extramural consultants, and a guidebook on compiling your promotions dossier.

FEDS  www.med.upenn.edu/apps/faculty  The Faculty Expertise Database System is a searchable database that serves as an excellent resource for finding potential mentors and collaborators at Penn. FEDS contains information relating to a number of faculty qualifications, including areas of expertise, education, publications, and grants.

FPD program  www.med.upenn.edu/fapd/fpd  The Faculty Professional Development program, run out of the Faculty Affairs and Professional Development office, offers sessions to help faculty build the skills and knowledge base they need to succeed in academic medicine. Topics include grant-writing, presentation skills, and career management.

Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty. Based on a course in scientific management sponsored by the Burroughs Wellcome Fund and Howard Hughes Medical Institute. 2004. Includes tips on a range of topics from setting up your lab to getting the mentoring you need to increasing your visibility to establishing collaborations. Can be printed from the following web site.  www.hhmi.org/grants/office/graduate/lab_book.html

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