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## Promotion, Tenure, and Merit-Based Pay: 15 Keys to Success

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## Promotion, Tenure, and Merit-Based Pay: 15 Keys to Success

### Abstract

Extension personnel are periodically evaluated against performance and productivity measures for promotion and merit-based pay. The most important evaluation for many Extension employees is the decision that grants tenure at a land-grant university. Areas of performance evaluation generally include teaching, scholarship/Extension practice, and service. While specific guidelines vary among academic institutions, general requirements are similar: documented excellence in all three areas of evaluation, national impact on one's discipline, improved practices of Extension clientele, excellent external review letters, and evidence of future productivity. This article describes 15 strategies for Extension faculty to achieve success in the university promotion and tenure process.

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Cooperative Extension personnel are periodically evaluated against various performance and productivity measures for promotion and merit-based pay. As an organization with roots in academia, the most important evaluation that many Extension employees face is the decision that grants tenure at a land-grant university. Not only do most campus-based Extension specialists prepare dossiers for tenure evaluation, but, according to a study by Olsen (2005), county agents are considered faculty at 58% of universities and eligible for tenure at half of them.

Areas of performance evaluation for tenure, promotion, and merit-pay decisions generally include teaching, scholarship/Extension practice, and service. While specific guidelines vary among academic institutions, general requirements for tenure are similar and include documented excellence in all three areas of evaluation, national impact on one's discipline, improved practices of Extension clientele, excellent external review letters, and evidence of future productivity.

The process of achieving tenure can seem daunting to new Extension professionals, who generally have 6 years to "make a case" for advancement. Following are 15 strategies to achieve success:

### 1. Select Mentors, and Learn the Criteria

Review university promotion requirements carefully, and attend available orientation sessions. Select experienced faculty who have achieved career success as mentors. Get referrals from your department chair/program leader and colleagues. Arrange periodic meetings with mentors for progress reports and feedback.

### 2. Organize a Filing System

Use file folders to organize documents such as published journal articles; Extension publications; Web site pages; newspaper columns; teaching evaluation score sheets; letters and e-mails from administrators, peers, funders, and clients; peer-reviewed curricula; award certificates; high quality thank-you letters; and press clippings of programs.

### 3. Document Teaching Excellence

Do post-class evaluations, wherever possible, and follow-up evaluations to obtain behavior change

data. Document staff and volunteer outreach and impact on supervised personnel. Consider doing statistical analyses of evaluation results, and collect testimonials that describe how lives were improved by an Extension program.

#### **4. Get Nationally Recognized for Teaching**

Develop state and/or nationally peer-reviewed curricula. Then share them with peers and track use of your materials. Other ways to obtain national recognition for teaching are awards from professional organizations and national program leadership roles (e.g., curriculum development working group).

#### **5. Conduct Applied Research**

In many tenure and promotion systems, Extension faculty are expected to participate in applied research activities. The more studies conducted, the better. Nichols (2004) notes that field-level faculty often lack both time and research skills. Partnering with on-campus specialists and research faculty or other colleagues can bridge this gap.

#### **6. Document Scholarship/Extension Practice**

The more refereed publications, professional conference presentations, grants, and awards, the better. Set annual performance goals for each performance indicator. For tenure dossiers, particularly, demonstrate a "pipeline" of future projects. Reviewers need to see evidence of future productivity. Adams, Harrell, Maddy, and Weigel (2005) recommend developing "a diversified portfolio of scholarship."

#### **7. Publish Early and Often**

The "gold standard" is a peer-reviewed article in a high-quality refereed journal. Publish in a variety of journals, and include URLs for online publications in your Vita. Learn a journal's required style (e.g., APA), and report citations and acceptance rates of journals in which your work appeared. As Hoelscher (2006) notes, the rigor of journals can increase over time, but "old reputations die hard." Promotion committees need to be educated.

#### **8. Present Early and Often**

There are only so many conference speaking opportunities before tenure packets come due. The "gold standard" is an invited keynote address, but all types of presentations (e.g., refereed workshops, invited panels, posters) are viewed positively. If travel costs present a financial burden, try writing "project dissemination expenses" into grants.

#### **9. Develop eXtension Scholarship Deliverables**

eXtension is an interactive online learning environment that delivers information to users worldwide. Examples of scholarly eXtension deliverables include publication of peer-reviewed content as a lead or contributing author, national leadership roles, service as a content reviewer, publications and presentations about eXtension work, and online presentations (The Scholarship of eXtension, 2007).

#### **10. Select Service Roles Carefully**

State and/or national service is good, but don't go "overboard" because service is generally weighted lower than teaching and scholarship/Extension practice. Don't get bogged down in service-related clerical work. Rather, seek out scholarly related service roles (e.g., journal editorial board, grant review panel, conference paper reviewer). Provide dependable service to professional associations, your university, and community.

#### **11. Turn Service into Scholarship**

Publish, conduct applied research, and/or make presentations on topics related to service roles. Not only can carefully selected service roles provide scholarly deliverables, but they also provide an opportunity to meet potential funders and external evaluators.

#### **12. Develop a Niche**

Successful promotion candidates develop a clear program focus and areas of expertise and get as much mileage from them as possible (e.g., publications, presentations, teaching, service, etc.). Reviewers look for evidence of respect by peers for a candidate's expertise. Being passionate about your niche will make this work personally, as well as professionally, rewarding.

#### **13. Prioritize Activities That Matter**

Block out time to write publications and submit applications for presentations and awards. Say "yes" to things that count most for promotion and "no" (or delegate) lower priority items. If you're in a tenure stream position, accept the fact that you'll work very hard for 6 years. County agents should integrate programming for the university and local stakeholders so it doesn't feel like "two jobs."

## 14. Demonstrate Value

Promotion committees tend to count things, so make it easy for them by subtotaling items such as number of classes and students taught, dollar amounts of grant funding, and number of publications and presentations. Where possible, calculate the economic value of programs using techniques such as cost-benefit analysis (O'Neill & Richardson, 1999). Other ways to demonstrate value to employers are increasing education and job skills, leadership roles, meeting project deadlines, and being liked and respected by peers.

## 15. Avoid Common Weaknesses

Indicators of a weak case for tenure and promotion include: lack of regional and/or national professional impact; a low number of publications, presentations, awards, and grants; lack of program focus and independent scholarship apart from teams; poor teaching evaluation scores; and poor external review letters.

University tenure and promotion processes involve a fairly rigid set of criteria. As a result, Extension faculty are challenged to demonstrate the value of their teaching, scholarship/Extension practice, and service to review committees that often include traditional, research oriented faculty. The strategies discussed above can help Extension faculty present their accomplishments in the best possible light and focus efforts on accomplishments that count most for professional advancement.

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