

Advice for Junior Faculty Regarding Academic Promotion: What Not to Worry About, and What to Worry About

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Lawrence Mbuagbaw¹⁻³
Laura N Anderson¹
Cynthia Lokker¹
Lehana Thabane^{1,2,4}

¹Department of Health Research Methods, Evidence and Impact, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, Canada;

²Biostatistics Unit, St Joseph Healthcare - Hamilton, Hamilton, ON, Canada;

³Centre for Development of Best Practices in Health, Yaoundé Central Hospital, Yaoundé, Cameroon;

⁴Departments of Paediatrics and Anaesthesia, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, Canada

Abstract: Junior faculty in many universities must go through the promotion process to advance from entry level, e.g., assistant professorship to associate Professor, and ultimately to professorship. The process may often be stressful for some junior faculty, mostly due to some uncertainty about how to optimise their chances of successful promotion. In this paper, we summarise some strategies that would enhance their chances of a smooth promotion based on experiences from junior faculty and senior faculty who have served on tenure and promotion committees. These strategies include understanding the promotion process at your institution; optimizing publications as first or senior author, securing research funding as principal investigator, teaching effectively, providing service efficiently; developing good time management and priority setting skills, finding excellent mentors, and targeting opportunities for collaboration. We also encourage junior faculty to be pro-active about promotion.

Keywords: junior faculty, advancement, promotion, academic, research, publishing, mentorship

Introduction

New and junior faculty are often expected to contribute to varying amounts of teaching, research, and service in order to be promoted.¹ The first step of academic promotion in most universities is the transition from Assistant to Associate Professor. Despite the availability of official university documents to assist faculty in preparing for promotion, this is not always a stress-free endeavour and junior faculty often worry about the requirements, processes, and outcomes of promotion. These worries stem from the current funding climate of research in which salary support for some faculty comes from “soft” sources, tenure track positions are rare, and the metrics for evaluating contributions to teaching, research, and service are rapidly evolving.^{2,3}

As junior faculty seek guidance in these matters, it is not uncommon that they seek advice from senior faculty and others who have gone through the same process. In this paper, we summarise the key concerns and proposed solutions for faculty at the assistant professor level regarding the process of promotion to associate professor at a research-intensive university department.

The counsel put forward in this paper comes from deliberations at meetings to support junior faculty in the promotion process and discussions with senior faculty experienced in reviewing tenure and promotion applications at a research-intensive

Correspondence: Lawrence Mbuagbaw
Biostatistics Unit/FSORC, 50 Charlton
Avenue East, St Joseph's Healthcare -
Hamilton, 3rd Floor Martha Wing, Room
H321, Hamilton, ON L8N 4A6, Canada
Tel +1-905-522-1155 ext 35929
Email mbuagblc@mcmaster.ca

department, and personal experience. These deliberations included one senior faculty member (full professor), two faculty members transitioning from assistant to associate professor and nine junior faculty preparing for the promotion process. All participants were primarily research-focused faculty affiliated with the department of Health Research Methods, Evidence and Impact (HEI) at McMaster University. HEI is home to four of Clarivate Analytics' 2019 list of the world's most cited researchers.⁴ The authors of this paper do research in HIV (LM); research methodology (LM, LA, CL, LT); biostatistics (LM, LT); eHealth, mHealth (CL, LM, LT); population and public health (LA, LT), chronic disease prevention and management (LA, LT), child obesity (LA). They are involved in diverse forms of multidisciplinary collaborations, nationally and internationally. Notes were taken during these meetings and used to inform this paper. We identified the following aspects to support junior faculty in getting promoted: 1) Understand the promotion process at your institution; 2) Publish, particularly as first or senior author; 3) Secure funding; 4) Teach effectively; 5) Provide service efficiently; 6) Develop good time management and priority setting skills; 7) Seek advice from mentors and; 8) Engage in collaborative activities.

Institutional Requirements for Advancement

First, get to know what is required at your institution early on by attending any faculty workshops and familiarizing yourself with the university policies or collective agreements regarding promotion requirements and expectations. Requirements vary by institution and it is important to understand the unique promotion process and timeline at your institution. You should make a list of documents you are expected to submit and what the minimum expectations are for each of these documents. For example, a curriculum vitae (CV) which must include evidence of research, teaching, and service would be required. Junior faculty may not always be certain about what goes where on the CV and for what they can claim credit. Research output should include peer-reviewed publications, evidence of participating in peer review, published abstracts, poster/oral presentations, book chapters, and technical reports. Teaching should include course coordination, course development, lecturing, tutoring, grading, student supervision, workshops, and webinars. Service should include roles on department, faculty and

university committees for grants, awards, admissions, ethics or education, and community service activities.

Second, in addition to the institutional policies on promotion, it is also helpful to seek additional information about the process from senior faculty, department chairs, deans, and faculty who sit on tenure and promotion committees. It may also be helpful to examine the submissions of previously promoted faculty.⁵

Publications

The debate is ongoing about the appropriate approach of measuring scholarly activity, and many papers have highlighted flaws in the current systems.^{6,7} Irrespective of the direction the wind blows, researchers will always be expected to produce research with a suitable balance of quality and quantity that indicate impact. What this means varies by department, faculty, university and field of research, but for the purposes of promotion, it is important to leave no doubt that you have effectively contributed to important work consistently.

A strong publication record is necessary for promotion.⁸ It is important to highlight your role for each scholarly contribution and its impact. A commonly reported omission was failure to indicate senior authorship on candidate CVs, which may be first or last, depending on norms across fields. Although some consideration is given to higher impact publications, the context is field specific and common metrics such as the impact factor of a journal will be judged on a case by case basis.⁹ It is up to the candidate to indicate the impact and reach of the journal for their field (footnotes can give context to the contents of a CV). For example, it is helpful to indicate if the lead author was a student under your supervision, if the paper is highly cited, informed guidelines or highlights a relevant attribute (i.e. multidisciplinary collaboration, novel methodology, etc.). Even though high impact publications are desirable, the number also matters.

On average 3–4 manuscripts per year as first or senior author appears to be the general recommendation. Over the usual 5-year career of an assistant professor, this results in approximately 15 first or senior author publications at the time of promotion. A recent publication indicated that junior faculty with at least 6 first-author publications over 10 years were more likely to be successfully promoted, regardless of the quality of the journals.¹⁰ Typically, junior faculty will be ranked against their peers in the same department or faculty. Do not compare yourself to the mean of a highly skewed distribution; for example, you may know that the mean number of publications per year in your department is 12,

but the median is 3. Since the distribution is skewed, aiming for 3 publications per year is a more reasonable target than 12. Further, these recommendations should be gauged against field-specific, department, and institutional norms to ensure that targets are feasible and realistic.

Additional papers as co-author are helpful but do not replace first or senior author papers, which demonstrate academic leadership (effectively taking initiative on a manuscript, managing the collaboration and incorporating feedback). Candidates are encouraged to plan their writing accordingly early in their career to juggle both contributions to co-authored projects and independent work. However, co-authored papers may play an important role in demonstrating cross-disciplinary or international collaboration, and methodological/statistical contributions to research. These should also be highlighted as footnotes.

In terms of how to achieve publications, common advice is to publish everything you do and schedule regular time for writing. Publications may include study protocols, description of new methods or applications of methods, including papers describing challenges, and educational contributions. Papers describing course development or educational research may be an added benefit when a promotion committee is considering educational contributions. Presentations are helpful, especially invited presentations, but all presentations should ultimately lead to a publication. Senior authorship on publications based on the work of undergraduate and graduate students contribute to both publishing and teaching metrics—a win-win scenario.

Abiding by a writing schedule can be challenging as other tasks seem more time sensitive. Consider additional training in academic writing and implementing accountability structures like writing circles or rewards to improve adherence to your plan.¹¹

Secure Funding

Challenges with funding are universally experienced but some evidence of successful independence demonstrated through success at obtaining external peer-reviewed funding as a principal investigator (PI) or co-PI is important. For the purposes of promotion, external funding (from national or international organisations) may have more weight than internal funding (local or provincial funding). Some tips include subscribing to mailing lists for opportunities, developing grant writing skills, and inviting senior colleagues to review grants prior to submission. Even though grant writing is time-consuming, it is important to maximize your opportunities for success by applying to any eligible opportunities.

Early career/junior research or salary awards are specifically tailored for junior faculty and securing such a grant increases your likelihood of success for future grants. It is not uncommon to apply for the same granting opportunity multiple times before being successful, therefore perseverance is paramount.¹²

Many institutions offer services to enhance the chance of their faculty getting grants. These may include tailored mailing list, linkages with external partners, internal review processes, grant writing training, and administrative support. Junior faculty should inquire about these services and use them to their benefit, as they tend to require such support more often.¹³ Junior faculty may also consult external resources.^{12,14–16}

In the absence of funding as lead investigator, participating in a grant in which some of the revenue comes to you is also helpful. Ultimately, the promotion panel would like to see that efforts have been made to secure funding by looking at the number of grant applications submitted.

Teach Effectively

Teaching is important and evidence of successful teaching and commitment to improvement is beneficial. Build a comprehensive teaching dossier that accurately reflects all the work you do related to teaching, including guest lectures and student supervision. The teaching dossier should contain a list of courses you have contributed to as coordinator, lecturer or grader, with the year, term and number of students in the course; student evaluations of your contributions should also be included; a brief outline of your teaching philosophy (your values, goals, and beliefs with regards to teaching); and other contributions to capacity building like presentations at workshops and seminars. Junior faculty are encouraged to attend workshops to improve your teaching and demonstrate commitment to education through published descriptions of novel teaching activities or course/curriculum development, and to learn about mentoring and invest in a productive group of students. Most importantly, document all your efforts. This could include emails from students who appreciated your course. Finally, compare the amount of time you spend on teaching to your agreed upon commitment to the university. You will be judged for promotion based on these agreed upon commitments. For many assistant professors, 30–40% of time would be allocated to teaching. It is important to stay within these boundaries to allocate your time to other activities.

Provide Service Efficiently

Service could include volunteering on committees, panels or boards—locally, nationally, or internationally. Some examples of services include admissions committees, award committees, ethics review boards, data safety and monitoring committees, steering committees and other scientific and research committees. Typically, service roles should take not more than 5–10% of a junior faculty's time. The choice of service should be chosen strategically. For example, service on national or international boards creates opportunities for networking. Sitting on the admissions committee allows a junior researcher to gauge the calibre of students admitted and gain insights on how to prepare a prospective student for admission. Sitting on grant review panels also helps junior faculty to understand the review process and improve their grant writing skills. Allowing service activities to take up more time will

not help for promotion if you are lacking in the other areas. Learn how and when to say “no”.^{17–19}

Develop Good Time Management and Priority Setting Skills

As a junior faculty, promotion is a logical career step and should be a priority. This means time should be set aside for the activities that would lead to promotion and for documenting these activities. Developing time management and priority setting skills is essential early in your career.^{12,20,21} Attending workshops and getting advice from mentors may help when developing these skills.²² Some departments may have annual reviews for junior faculty. This is a good opportunity to review individual progress, determine if you are on track and readjust your schedules. It is important to set time for certain activities and to determine which are the most important.

Table 1 Core Actions to Facilitate Promotion

Tip	Activities	Resources
Institutional requirement for advancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and read institutional procedures for advancement Talk with other faculty who have gone through the process Talk with faculty who sit on tenure and promotion committees Create a checklist of documents required Identify and collect the information required to complete the required documents 	Not applicable
Publications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set a target number of publications per year Set time aside for writing Publish all stages of research (e.g. protocol, full paper) Publish other forms of research endeavours (e.g. pilot studies, challenges, and opportunities) Publish academic and educational activities (e.g. course development, workshop reports) 	24,25
Secure funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join mailing lists for sources of funding Invest in grant writing training Seek institutional support for grant writing (e.g. budget writing, internal peer review) Perseverance matters 	11–15
Effective teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teach as per agreed commitment Document evidence of effective teaching and teaching innovation Invest in enhancing teaching skills 	26,27
Time management and priority-setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build time management skills Set time aside to complete promotion-related activities and document them Set targets for research, teaching, and service and evaluate progress yearly 	28,29
Mentorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify a good mentor and seek advice Work with your department promotion team to meet targets 	30–33
Collaborative activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join highly productive research groups Identify opportunities to contribute and benefit from groups 	25

Find Excellent Mentors and Ask for Advice

The decision for promotion likely occurs internally at the department level. Work with your department chair and faculty mentor (if you have one) to ensure you are on the right track. Departments are unlikely to recommend faculty for promotion if they do not think they will succeed; therefore, it is important to ensure that you are on track during your annual evaluations. Seek mentorship and advice from faculty at all career stages who have been through the promotion process. The benefits of a good mentoring relationship include critical feedback, guidance through the system, advocacy, and networking.²³ Mentors may also help in achieving research, teaching, and service requirements.

Engage in Collaborative Activities

Universities are the ideal setting for research collaboration and collaboration may be beneficial to junior faculty. Collaboration permits researcher to have a wider reach and exposes them to more opportunities for research, co-authorship, funding, and capacity building. Even though collaboration is influenced by the availability of resources and the nature of the research question, there is a strong link between collaboration and productivity.²⁴

Putting the Pieces Together

Getting promotion requires a multifaceted approach to demonstrating academic competence and the various facets are intertwined. It is easier to write a convincing grant proposal if you have published preliminary work that demonstrates expertise in the field or feasibility of the proposed research. Therefore prior publications may influence future funding. Likewise, service and committee work may provide insights on how grant committees work and what kinds of grants get funded. Some research indicates that junior researchers working in large teams tend to produce high-quality research,²⁵ therefore mentorship and collaboration are important. We have outlined deliberate actions junior faculty can take to ensure they are ready for promotion when the time comes. See Table 1.

Conclusion

Junior faculty have 5–6 years to be eligible for promotion. This should be enough time to prepare accordingly. Preparation should be pro-active, with junior faculty identifying the requirements in their institution and taking deliberate actions to meet them while seeking guidance

from senior faculty. The strategies outlined above may provide some experience-based insights on things to do to ensure a smooth promotion process. The bottom line is that faculty output should match institutional expectations.

Disclosure

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