

Faculty Senate White Paper on Course Evaluations and Tenure and Promotion in the Context of COVID-19

Context and Background

In the spring semester of 2020, COVID-19 became the most severe and significant global pandemic since the 1919 H1N1 Influenza pandemic. On March 11, the administration of the University of Texas at Tyler extended spring break by one week (to Friday, March 20) and to hold all classes online for the week of March 23. As the spread of COVID-19 rapidly expanded, on March 17 the University leadership decided to conduct all classes online for the remainder of the semester as a measure to decrease the potential spread of the disease.

The University was not alone in taking such measures. Around the world, classrooms switched to online, and in many states and countries, “non-essential” employment shifted to working online, saw a reduction in output, or even witnessed a temporary total shutdown. Numerous states and communities were mandated to “shelter in place” to restrict movement in the community.

As a result, COVID-19 has had a profound effect on all faculty at UT-Tyler in a number of arenas. Many faculty members found themselves having to suddenly transform courses that had not been designed or planned as online courses to the online arena, disrupting methods of teaching, pedagogical strategies, faculty strengths, and student experiences for many. Likewise, research and productivity faced real challenges, as grant decisions were postponed or cancelled, the reviewing process witnessed a slowdown, and a bottleneck occurred in publication calendars, and presses slowed down or halted production. Furthermore, the restrictions recommended by the Center for Disease Control, primarily “social distancing,” placed unforeseen demands on faculty (e.g.; Working from home with childcare obligations, homeschooling initiatives, among other issues) that restricted them from being able to devote the time, attention, and mental energy toward dedicating themselves in scholarly endeavors.

Each of these elements – teaching and research – are essential to tenure-track faculty’s efforts to achieve tenure and promotion, and to tenured faculty’s efforts to be promoted. The effects of COVID-19 will make themselves felt in both the short- and long-term for faculty across all colleges in the years to come. As a result, the Faculty Senate of UT-Tyler recommends alterations to teaching evaluation considerations for the spring 2020 semester and consideration for the tenure and promotion process for full-time faculty who were employed in spring 2020.

On Teaching Evaluations in Spring 2020

The profound and abrupt transformations in teaching brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 have affected all those involved in teaching and learning at UT Tyler. Many faculty – including tenure track but also clinical instructors, adjunct instructors, lecturers, and senior lecturers – had to suddenly convert face-to-face or hybrid courses to

an all-online format in the span of no more than 12 days from the initial March 11 announcement to the resumption of courses on March 23. Many students did not sign up for such courses and suddenly found themselves taking courses online.

Given this dramatic shift in the teaching landscape for the spring 2020 semester, and given that teaching evaluations play a role in the assessment of faculty for the purposes of merit pay raises and tenure and promotion, the Faculty Senate recommends several procedures regarding the emphasis of teaching evaluations from spring 2020.

- Positive teaching evaluations will be incorporated into all faculty, lecturer, senior lecturer, and other full-time instructor position files on teaching for the purpose of merit pay, annual evaluations, and/or tenure and/or promotion. This policy should apply to all faculty and full-time non-tenure-track instructors, whether they were already online courses or not. The Senate maintains that the inclusion of positive evaluations is important because it allows those who already were teaching online to have their evaluations taken into consideration, while it also allows those who successfully transitioned from face-to-face or hybrid to all-online to have their successes noted.
- In the event that a faculty member's teaching evaluations for spring 2020 are negative, the evaluations will be discounted and excluded from all assessments of faculty and full-time non-tenure-track instructors. The Faculty Senate supports this position based on the fact that not all faculty were equipped – professionally or personally – for the time-intensive process of online class design. To negatively evaluate faculty for their performance in a format they had not signed up for, designed the class for, or had time to adequately prepare for, is unfair to faculty and their efforts toward merit pay and/or tenure and/or promotion.

The Faculty Senate of UT-Tyler believe that, by considering positive evaluations but discounting negative evaluations, the university can simultaneously allow faculty who transitioned well to be rewarded while avoiding penalizing those who could not foresee having to teach a course(s) in a format they had not intended or had time to prepare for.

On Tenure & Promotion for Tenure-Track and Tenured Faculty and Clinical Faculty Employed in Spring 2020

As noted above, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 reached into academic life beyond the matter of transferring courses to an online format for spring 2020. The effects of the pandemic will continue to ripple and affect faculty ability to conduct and produce original research in the coming months and years in ways that cannot be fully quantified at the current moment. As a result, the Faculty Senate makes the following recommendations regarding Tenure and Promotion (and Promotion for tenured and clinical faculty) in the context of COVID-19.

- All tenure-earning junior faculty who are employed at UT-Tyler in Spring 2020 will automatically receive a one-year extension on their tenure and promotion

clock. Allowing faculty to delay filing for tenure and promotion by one year (presuming a return to normalcy by the end of Spring 2021) is fair for an accurate assessment of their performance. Those faculty who feel prepared to submit their online portfolio based on the schedule of their original tenure clock when they were hired may opt out of this extension. If they do, standard tenure and promotion procedures will occur in the standard timeline and practice in consultation with their chair and dean.

- All currently-employed tenure-track, clinical track, and tenured faculty in the spring semester of 2020 seeking tenure and/or promotion in the next several years must have the events of Spring 2020 considered in their tenure and/or promotion files.

These applications must leave room for the faculty's respective department committee, chair, college committee, dean, and the Provost to take into consideration the challenges faculty faced in the change in their teaching and research duties for Spring 2020.

- All currently-employed tenure-track, clinical track, full-time instructors, and tenured faculty in the spring semester of 2020 seeking tenure and/or promotion in the next several years must have the events of Spring 2020 considered in their tenure and/or promotion files. These applications must leave room for the faculty's respective department committee, chair, college committee, dean, and the Provost to take into consideration any gap in research or productivity that occurs not just in 2020, but in subsequent years.
- All Associate Professors and Professors employed in the spring semester of 2020 must have the events and long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic taken into consideration in their post-tenure review and any subsequent opportunities for further promotion, awards, or other honors. Chairs, deans, committees, or others involved in such processes must take into consideration any disruptions or delays resulting from the challenges faculty faced in their teaching and research regime in Spring 2020 and beyond.
- Tenured Associate and Full Professors employed during the spring semester of 2020 may have been adversely affected by the events and long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty committee members, chairs/directors, deans, the Provost, and any others involved in decisions related to post-tenure reviews, promotion, awards, or other honors must take into consideration any disruptions or delays resulting from the challenges faculty may face in their teaching and research regimen during this semester and beyond. Faculty declaring any hardships resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic are responsible for providing necessary documentation to any committee's or superiors making decisions.

The Faculty Senate of UT-Tyler endorses these positions based on the potential and probable long-term effects of shutdowns and disruptions to academic life as a result of COVID 2019.

- Many faculty depend on interviews, interactions, and close proximity to conduct research, be it in a lab, in interviews, in research overseas, or dependent on grant applications that were suspended or delayed in Spring 2020 as the country went on a shutdown nationwide. While these interruptions occurred in the Spring of 2020, the effects on research are long-term, delaying people's ability to collect data, perform experiments, visit archives, conduct interviews, and other essential research activities for several months and up to a year, depending on grant cycles. As a result, this will create a "gap" in our ability to analyze and publish research in any number of fields across all the colleges.
- Press shutdowns nationwide will lead to a delay in the publication of journal articles and books, as external reviewers themselves have delayed or declined conducting reviews as they deal with COVID-19 themselves, and as presses have shut down or gone to extremely limited staff. The result will be a delay in publication timelines and a bottleneck in journals and presses that could last years.

The result of these factors will mean it is quite possible and probable that what would have been a regular schedule of publications (articles, books, music performances, art exhibitions, and other professional and peer-reviewed items) will now be less consistent or may have gaps and interruptions across the next several years as the long-term effects of the shutdown from COVID-19 make themselves felt. Research on the effects of parental leave on faculty productivity may serve as a useful analogy in this case; gaps in productivity on a faculty member's CV often appear 1-2 years after the semester that leave was taken, as childcare duties affect research agendas and schedules (Krapf et al., 2017).

Conclusions

Based on the transformations that COVID-19 has imposed upon faculty in both the short-term and long-term in the areas of teaching and research, Faculty Senate believes that it is appropriate for the university to adopt the recommendations described above.

- For the purposes of merit pay and tenure-and-promotion, allow positive teaching evaluations from Spring 2020 to stand, but exclude and discount negative evaluations;
- For the purposes of tenure and promotion, mechanisms be established that acknowledge, address, recognize, and accept gaps in research or productivity that may be a result of the short- and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 on faculty research and creativity.
- For the purposes of yearly evaluations, post-tenure review, and other promotions and honors for Associate Professors and Professors, mechanisms be established that acknowledge, address, recognize, and accept variances in teaching evaluations, gaps in research, scholarship, and creativity that may be a result of the short- and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.