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Tenure and Promotion in Honors

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The *Chronicle of Higher Education Review* (2/11/05) published an article on “Collaborative Efforts: Promoting Interdisciplinary Scholars” by Stephanie L. Pfirman, James P. Collins, Susan Lowes, and Anthony F. Michaels. They wrote, “Creative research and teaching increasingly occur at the junction between traditional disciplines. As a result, many colleges and universities have committed themselves to fostering interdisciplinary scholarship. But the scholars who work at that junction are confronted with conventional departmental hiring, review, and tenure procedures that are not suited to interdisciplinary work and can slow or block the progress of their careers.”

The Honors Program at the University of New Mexico has nine full-time faculty members. It is important that full-time faculty dedicated to Honors education should have equal privileges as other faculty on campus in terms of their careers. The best way to accomplish this goal was to establish hiring, review, tenure, and promotion processes for faculty in the Honors Program. The process for UNM’s University Honors Program faculty had to be created so that it would observe criteria for other faculty on campus and, at the same

time, include principles for interdisciplinary work. For the most part, the process has worked although some of the expectations are more encompassing than those for faculty in a specific discipline.

The UNM Honors Program (UHP), which has approximately 1400 students, is primarily interdisciplinary. The University also has departmental honors opportunities in various departments, and the UHP will accept those credit hours toward graduation with Honors. This enables students to complete a broad, liberal arts, interdisciplinary honors education as well as an in-depth research project or thesis in their major. It is, however, the interdisciplinary character of the program that has led us to address various issues related to the concerns posed by Pfirman et al. above.

Because of the nature of the program, we have many ongoing endeavors and student activities or programs that require hiring some full-time continuing faculty, especially because one director would not be able to accomplish all of these activities. Full-time faculty in the Honors Program serve as mentors and coordinators for such activities. Dr. Leslie Donovan, for example, serves as the mentor, teacher, and advisor for *Scribendi*, the literary and arts magazine that publishes original pieces by honors students from the Western Regional Honors Council. Other full-time faculty assist with mentoring students for national and international fellowships and scholarships; coordinate theses or final senior projects; coordinate the student-teachers; direct international UHP programs such as Conexiones in Spain and Mexico and the Honors Biodiversity Program in Australia; and serve as the advisors for the Honors Student Advisory Council and the Honors Residence Hall. These faculty also teach interdisciplinary honors courses and serve as program advisors. Additional courses are taught by faculty from other departments on campus or visiting instructors.

Although often pressured to hire faculty with joint appointments, as director I have resisted primarily because of the substantial amount of work required of full-time faculty in Honors. I have also found that hiring faculty with one or more departmental appointments becomes problematic. The appointment must spell out the research, teaching, service, and other obligations for all departments involved at the time of hire. Having homes in several departments often means that faculty members have two or more full-time jobs. Very often they have limited "face time" in their "home" departments. In some units, they are not at home anywhere, or are at home everywhere, and may have to do extra duty and attend to multiple sets of tasks such as departmental meetings, for instance. In practice, these faculty, although

holding a full-time contract, are often treated as part-time faculty in each of the departments. Most often, these faculty “belong” more to one department than another, which may cause friction and a schizophrenic frame of mind for the faculty member. Tenuring a faculty member in a department and “borrowing” him or her to work full-time in honors creates its own set of challenges. The department would have the final say in who is hired, and the faculty member tenured elsewhere would have the option of leaving the Honors Program at any time.

The full-time faculty members in the UNM Honors Program received doctorates in traditional disciplines including anthropology, biology, English, French, American studies, and history, but they have made honors their professional focus. So, the challenge was to determine how these professionals were to advance in this profession. How were they to be rewarded? Specifically, how could they be tenured and promoted?

The University Honors Program has a national reputation for academic innovation, educational research, quality of teaching, and commitment to teaching. It is within this context that criteria to define the competence and excellence required for promotion and tenure have been developed. Competence and excellence in scholarship, teaching, and service are evaluated both on quality and quantity parameters.

One of the major obstacles toward tenure and promotion in honors programs and colleges is that “Honors” is not a discipline. This does not mean, however, that honors education is not a profession. There is sufficient evidence across the country to indicate that there are educators in higher education who choose to work in honors programs or colleges exclusively. Dr. Donovan, mentioned earlier, is a UHP alumnus, and we have several UHP alumni who come back as adjunct faculty. Several alumni who plan to become professors have said that they want to make honors their professional focus. In addition, many colleges and universities have committed themselves to fostering interdisciplinary scholarship, which is the cornerstone of most honors programs and colleges.

Interdisciplinary scholars frequently face a set of common difficulties in their research, teaching, and administrative roles. Interdisciplinary research often entails special challenges because of the high networking costs: colleagues with different priorities and different field seasons, and disciplinary language barriers. Time and energy are also required to make and maintain connections, including vetting and editing documents with many authors. Interdisciplinary education supports the notion that all subjects are intimately

related. In most departments, however, these relationships are often ignored and teachers are encouraged to focus on one area of specialization. The principal barrier to interdisciplinary research has been the pattern of university organization that creates vested interests in traditionally defined departments. Administratively, all educational activity needs to “belong” somewhere in order to be accounted for and supported.

I recently learned of an institution that did not include its honors program in the new marketing and recruitment materials because the program did not grant degrees. Generally, courses must be offered through a department, and students are asked to place themselves in one college or another. The limitations on this kind of structure are recognized in every university by defining new departments, approving new programs, and creating centers in which to house courses, often experimental, that do not fit into the disciplines. At the University of New Mexico, University College was reorganized to accommodate many of the interdisciplinary programs that had been created in recent years. The Honors Program, although founded in 1960 and having shifted from the Provost’s office to that of one or another of the Associate Provosts, was included under the umbrella of University College. Having a “home” under an established college has strengthened the Honors Program’s ability to establish reasonable criteria for tenure and promotion comparable to other units on campus.

Tenure and promotion decisions in Honors, as in other departments on campus, require established excellence in at least two areas and at least some level of competence in the third (teaching, scholarship, service). But what is excellence in an interdisciplinary program such as honors, and what is excellence in teaching in such an interdisciplinary field? Departments find that, for passing judgment on peers, research productivity is a much more manageable criterion than teaching effectiveness. Student evaluations and alumni testimonials have been notoriously weak evidence, and reliable self-evaluation is all but impossible. At this point, promotion and tenure committees still find teaching effectiveness difficult to measure. Publication is at least a perceptible tool; the relative ease of its use has reinforced the reliance on it for tenure and promotion decisions. Evaluating good teaching may always be difficult, but effective integration of research and teaching should be observable, as should the development of interdisciplinary approaches to learning.

The typical department in a research university will assert that it places a high value on effective teaching. It will be able to cite faculty members among its ranks who take conspicuous pride in their reputations as successful

teachers; it may be able to point to student evaluations that give consistently high ratings to many of its members. At the same time, however, discussions concerning tenure and promotion are likely to focus almost entirely on research or creative productivity. The department head, when making recommendations, may look almost exclusively at research and penalize junior faculty who seem to give disproportionate time and attention to teaching or to experimental or interdisciplinary courses.

Because the mission of the University Honors Program is primarily to provide an interdisciplinary, enhancing education for undergraduates, teaching is a major criterion in assessing UHP faculty. Consequently, in their tenure packets (portfolios), faculty are expected to provide a statement on teaching, including a brief discussion of perceived successes, future goals, and expectations. Of course, teaching evaluations are also part of the portfolio as are sample syllabi, materials developed for classes, special programs such as field-based courses, service-learning components of courses, and other teaching materials.

Co-teaching is often a strong component of honors courses. Students benefit from having two or more teachers, and this arrangement is an excellent way to achieve interdisciplinary perspectives. However, without full-time faculty status in honors, faculty members frequently get credit for only part of the course. Coordinating course development, teaching, and the administration of assignments and grading is significantly more difficult than providing two separate courses. Moreover, departments are usually credited with just one half of the students; often these classes are electives and therefore not considered by departments to be as important as foundational classes. This becomes more problematic in tough budgetary times when departments are scrambling for more dollars and higher FTEs.

In 1895, the first president of the University of Chicago, William Rainey Harper, asked each new faculty member to agree in writing that advancements in rank and salary would be governed chiefly by research productivity. This stipulation, novel in its time, would raise few eyebrows in most research universities a century later. They might claim otherwise, but research universities consider “success” and “research productivity” to be virtually synonymous. It’s the old “publish or perish” standard.

Research and study are certainly important to inform one’s teaching and to expand a faculty member’s individual knowledge. However, scholarship need not be in conventional disciplinary research. Some alternative activities include development of new teaching techniques and programs;

and recognition by peers for contributing ideas to and/or advancing honors education. To ensure that such activities are given proper consideration, proper documentation of these kinds of scholarship must be included in the portfolio. Most important, such contributions should have some recognition beyond the boundaries of the University of New Mexico.

When publications are evaluated, attention should be paid to the pedagogical quality of the work as well as its contribution to scholarship. We have emphasized that honors is a community of learners. Faculty and students contribute their particular combinations of imagination, experience, and accumulated knowledge. The divisions that have been created between teacher and pupil are often artificial and counter-productive and must be bridged for effective collaborations to occur.

To be considered competent in scholarship/research/creative works, the individual must show activity comparable to others of the same rank within Honors at an average or above average level. This will usually include works published in appropriate venues such as the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, the former *National Honors Report*, or the new *Honors in Practice*. Faculty may also publish in appropriate journals in fields that complement their work in honors. Younger faculty are often more at ease with technology and more adept at publishing in e-journals. The rapid growth of information and communication technology plays a critical role in restructuring the mechanisms by which specialized academic knowledge is validated, distributed, and made available. The academic reward system is structured to encourage quality scholarship primarily in the form of publications, and the number of e-journals is growing. Review teams must then be conscious of the parameters, process, and quality of publishing in this venue.

Scholarship/research/creative activities may also be characterized by continuity. Strategies and designs that further honors curricula, teaching, and programmatic activities must be considered. Books, articles (especially in peer-reviewed journals), creative works, grants, and presentations at professional conferences are all suitable materials (resources) for tenure and promotion consideration.

Service activity is often less problematic. At many institutions, junior faculty are simply told not to do any but to concentrate their time and efforts on scholarship. Service, however, is important. Think of all of the committee work that would not be done without the volunteer services of faculty. Special contributions, such as acting as chair of a professional meeting session or serving on an honors committee, not only bring visibility, acknowledgment, and

standing in the community, but they keep the world going round! Committee work also contributes to the dialogue of the professional community. Faculty who engage in activities within their local (university and community) and broader professional communities (NCHC, regional honors councils, and discipline-specific organizations) maintain a vitality that not only enhances their careers but benefits others as well.

Because the full-time faculty in honors cannot be pigeon-holed into one discipline or field, the guidelines for promotion and tenure have to be flexible. Thus, for example, at UNM we form Tenure and Promotion Committees individual to each faculty member on tenure-track. Dr. Ursula Shepherd, for example, received a Ph.D. in biology. Her committee consisted of two biology professors; an associate provost, who, although a music professor, was interdisciplinary in her scholarship, teaching, and projects; an American studies professor, whose focus has been on environmental issues (American studies itself being an interdisciplinary field); and an associate professor from the Centennial Library (science and engineering branch). External reviewers for Dr. Shepherd included honors individuals across the country as well as biology professors. Dr. Shepherd's scholarship included work in biology, honors, nature writing, and field-based programs. The majority of her work is interdisciplinary.

Dr. Troy Lovata, whose Ph.D. is in anthropology, is currently in his third year of a tenure-track appointment. His committee consists of three faculty from the Anthropology Department and three tenured faculty in the Honors Program. There may come a time when all of the full-time faculty in the Honors Program are tenured, but even then I think it would be beneficial to include one or two faculty from fields related to the tenure-track faculty member's discipline. It is also advantageous to include professors on campus who have clout and are well respected. We try whenever possible to include faculty who have either taught in the Honors Program or have served on the Honors Council.

The tenure and promotion process for honors faculty continues to evolve at the University of New Mexico. Thus far, we have four tenured faculty members. As the members of the National Collegiate Honors Council become more professionally committed to honors endeavors, and as more honors programs and colleges institute tenure and promotion in honors, it will become less problematic to constitute acceptable and equitable guidelines for tenure and promotion in honors.

REFERENCE

Pfirman, Stephanie L., James P. Collins, Susan Lowes, and Anthony F. Michaels. "Collaborative Efforts: Promoting Interdisciplinary Scholars." *The Chronicle of Higher Education Review*, February 11, 2005.

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