2.8.1 Junior Faculty Counseling and Mentoring

Formerly Known As Policy Number:

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Providing support, guidance, advice and feedback to junior faculty is a high priority for Stanford University. There is variation across the university in how this support and guidance is provided, and the university does not mandate a particular methodology. However, it is expected that counseling and mentoring will occur on a regular basis. These guidelines outline the general expectations for the kinds of support, advice and feedback junior faculty should receive. Faculty members with questions in this area should consult their department chair or dean.

2.8.1(1) Counseling

Counseling, which is the first aspect of guiding junior faculty, entails providing feedback on performance relative to the standards for reappointment and promotion. Department Chairs, Deans or their delegates for schools without departments, should confer annually with each junior faculty member in their department or school to review his or her performance in light of the criteria for reappointment and promotion.

Appropriate areas to discuss may include: scholarship quality and productivity to date; general expectations of the discipline with respect to quantity; form or scholarly venue of publications; expectations, if applicable, about other indicators of recognition such as grant funding; suggestions for the scholarship that may be helpful; teaching quality, quantity, and type to date (including acknowledgment of special efforts in teaching); quality of performance in other academic activities (such as creative works or clinical practice), if applicable; general expectations as to levels of service appropriate for junior faculty (and acknowledgment of special service efforts); and any professional, behavioral or institutional citizenship issues.

These counseling sessions should include direct reference to the university’s and the school’s criteria for reappointment and promotion, as set forth in Appendix B to the Faculty Handbook (available online at http://facultyhandbook.stanford.edu) and as supplemented by the school’s handbook. The comparative and predictive aspects of the tenure/promotion decision should be stressed, as should be the fact that tenure/promotion judgments generally cannot be made until the referee letters are received as part of the evaluation process. For this reason, counseling the junior faculty member that he or she is “on track” to gaining tenure or promotion is inappropriate.

Schools vary in viewpoint and practice as to whether there should be a written record of these annual discussions. The university leaves this matter to each school’s discretion. However, the university does require a written record of the counseling letter at the time of reappointment, and at the time of promotion to some (but not all) ranks.

The counseling letter provides an opportunity to give candid feedback to a junior faculty member on his or her academic performance and progress to date based on the results of this reappointment or promotion review. The counseling letter provides a vehicle for this feedback, which should be constructive, realistic, and specifically tailored to the candidate and to the standards and criteria he or she will face in a future review or promotion.

The counseling letter is submitted with the recommendation papers. It is expected that the counseling letter
submitted with the file will be in draft form. Only after completion of the review process should the counseling letter be finalized and then given to the faculty member. After receiving the counseling letter, the faculty member is encouraged to meet with his or her department chair to discuss in more detail the feedback contained in the letter. Department chairs are in turn encouraged to offer such a meeting, if one is not requested.

Finally, although the purpose of the counseling letter is to offer practical guidance to the junior faculty member in regard to his or her future efforts (such as by pointing out areas for potential attention or improvement), the candidate should understand that the strategic advice offered is not a prescription for achieving tenure or promotion, but rather the letter writer’s best judgment based on the results of this review. As noted more generally below, the ultimate responsibility for career trajectory and success rests with each faculty member himself or herself.

2.8.1(2) Mentoring

The second aspect of the guidance to be offered to junior faculty is mentoring, that is, the ongoing advice and support regarding the junior faculty member’s scholarship, teaching and (where applicable) clinical performance. Schools are expected to have policies and practices for providing mentoring to junior faculty; these vary across the university. In general, it is recommended that junior faculty be assigned mentors who are senior faculty members but not department chairs. The mentor should be available to provide guidance on an ongoing basis and should meet at least annually with the junior faculty member. In situations in which the initial mentor assignment is not successful, department chairs or deans should work with the junior faculty member to identify a suitable mentor.

Junior faculty should also be encouraged to seek informal mentors from inside or outside their department who may share interests and provide additional perspectives.

2.8.1(3) Information Sessions

Central university offices such as the Vice Provost for Faculty Development and Diversity and the Center on Teaching and Learning provide some general orientation and information sessions for new and junior faculty. However, topics for which practices vary significantly among schools or departments should be discussed with junior faculty locally, by the school and/or department, through information sessions and/or mentoring. These topics might include teaching and grading strategies and practices, graduate student advising, expectations regarding publications in the specific field, expectations for and sources of grant funding, and management of research budgets and personnel.

2.8.1(4) The Junior Faculty Member’s Responsibility

The core purpose of counseling and mentoring is to provide candid and helpful feedback and guidance to the individual. The goal is to provide a supportive atmosphere to assist the junior faculty in succeeding in his or her academic career. However, it should also be recognized and communicated to the junior faculty member (and it is here reiterated) that the ultimate responsibility for career trajectory and success lies with each faculty member himself or herself. Thus it is up to the junior faculty: to respond to invitations to meet with their mentors, department chairs, or deans; to request counseling and mentoring sessions if such sessions are not otherwise scheduled for them; to attend information sessions offered to them; and to be familiar with the policies and procedures concerning reappointment, tenure and promotion, in particular those in the Faculty Handbook (including the criteria in the forms found in Appendix B [1]) and in school faculty handbooks. Similarly the junior faculty member should understand that a faculty mentor’s strategic advice (like the advice contained in the counseling letter written at the time of reappointment) is not a prescription for achieving tenure or promotion, but rather a senior colleague’s best judgment, to be accepted or rejected as the junior faculty member chooses. Accordingly, inadequate counseling and mentoring is generally not considered sufficient grounds for appealing a negative tenure or promotion decision.

Stanford University hires the best and brightest junior faculty and is committed to providing opportunities,
resources, and support, including counseling and mentoring, to help them develop into outstanding scholars, teachers, and clinicians. The policies and practices described in these guidelines are intended to assist each faculty member in launching a successful academic career.


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