A Tenure Track Cohort Case Study

Tenure Track Cohort Tip Sheet: The Importance of Improving Extension Faculty Retention and Tenure Success

Tenure track positions within universities and colleges are prestigious and highly sought after. However, the tenure process can seem daunting. For a faculty member entering the field of Extension, the learning curve can seem quite steep. This is especially true when attempting to balance the need for a comprehensive tenure package that includes scholarship, teaching and service.

There has been a shift away from the tenure system in higher education (Waltman et al. 2012) and Extension education (Olsen, 2018). At many institutions, a tenure-track faculty's job duties are focused on research and grant writing and a growing number of non-tenure track faculty (professional track) take on more teaching duties.

This shift is having profound impacts on educational quality and faculty job satisfaction. Ehrenberg and Zhang (2005) conducted a study using College Board data and found that reducing the ratio of tenure-track to non-tenure-track track faculty has a negative impact on graduation rates. Several studies found reduced job satisfaction among non-tenure track faculty (Nester & Leary, 2000).

These results suggest that the conflict between the work required for tenure (research and grant writing) and the faculty's teaching duties and personal lives lead to job dissatisfaction among tenure-track faculty (Greene et al. 2008). The research highlights the need for work-life balance among tenure-track faculty members. Support networks are one key tool to help faculty learn how to achieve that balance.

This Extension Fact Sheet shares tips for Extension faculty on the tenure track, based on the experiences of the cohort of tenure-track University of Maryland Extension faculty, thus referred to as the 2021 cohort. We found that both the initiation of the cohort and the dedication and commitment of the members are necessary for success.

The Cohort Model Offers Support for Tenure-track Faculty

Encouraging faculty who share a tenure deadline to form a cohort to work together throughout the tenure process is a recent innovation in faculty retention. The cohort serves as a support network and a professional community of practice (Smith, 2003).

The 2021 cohort was originally comprised of seven faculty members who began their current roles with the University of Maryland Extension (UME) between November 2015 and July 2016. Of the original cohort

members, there were four 4-H faculty (two field-based educators and two state-level specialists), two agriculture agents (both field faculty) and one Family and Consumer Science educator (also field faculty). Three came with prior Extension experience and all had experience, knowledge and passion for their areas of interest and Extension assignments.

In November 2016, a tenured Extension faculty member convened the first 2021 cohort meeting to explain the tenure process and expectations, but also encouraged the members to support each other through the tenure process. Based on conversations and concerns voiced during that meeting, the cohort decided to organize into a community of practice (Smith 2003) to help navigate the tenure-track process and assist with the Extension learning curve.

The group's plan of action for year one is outlined below. The purpose of this brief is to help future tenure-track cohorts navigate a similar path and perhaps lessen the stress along the way.

Cohort Determined Goals and Speakers for Monthly Meetings

The cohort began by scheduling monthly conference calls starting in January 2017. The cohort members:

- Used the Google Calendar system to schedule a recurring monthly conference call;

- Did not have to share calendars to use the Google Calendar option. When creating a calendar entry, there is an option to invite a guest (to the right of the time, date and location information). It requires an email address and sends to individuals outside the University system; and

- Used conference call services including WebEx, to conduct the monthly calls. Other institutions may employ similar web conferencing software.

During this first conference call, the cohort:

- Became acquainted by sharing their experiences and advice they acquired since their careers began;

- Discussed the goals for the monthly meetings and for the year; and

- Identified future topics and/or speakers the cohort wanted to hear about/from.

Discussion during the first conference call produced distinct goals for the upcoming year, including:

- Gathering and sharing information in order to network with colleagues;

- Discussing how to break down tenure expectations into achievable milestones;

- Developing connections with faculty and staff throughout the College of Agriculture & Natural Resources; and

- Helping each other keep/gain perspective and manage expectations.

Consistent with these goals, the cohort decided to ask individuals within UMD Extension to speak with the cohort at their monthly meetings. The list of individuals/ topics included:

- UME Assistant Director for Evaluation and Research to discuss research and Institutional Review Board;

- Conversations with cohort-member mentors to ask their advice regarding the tenure process;

- Area Extension Directors to discuss suggestions for cross-program collaboration and advice on tenure process and balancing Extension work;

- Highlights, challenges and current work with each other; and

- Training information and other resources to support each other.

To support their community of practice, the group also set up a shared folder to store and share documents easily. This allowed members to share information from workshops with others unable to attend and to work on collaborative projects.

Due to the travel required by Extension work, the cohort found WebEx's audio-only conference call service helpful. The audio-only option does not require a host to be logged on to a computer to start the call. A video showing how to set up audio-only conference calls is available at: https://go.umd.edu/webex-audioconf-video.

In Year One, the Majority of the Cohort Met on a Regular Basis

During 2017, the group scheduled and held conversations with the following UME individuals:

- Principal Agricultural Agent from Carroll County and cohort member mentor shared his thoughts on what a successful tenure track position looks like and general advice such as taking advantage of opportunities as they happen;

- Principal Agricultural Agent from Washington County and mentor to two of the cohort members shared insight from his 29 years with Extension and general advice such as using your passion and program to formulate your scholarship plan;

- Senior 4-H Agent and Extension Specialist for Curriculum and Development and cohort member mentor shared her view of the role of the mentor/mentee relationship and key advice such as being strategic in your efforts; and

- Area Extension Director for the Western Cluster and former Senior Family Consumer Science Agent shared her perspective on program development and recommended being proactive with your mentor and the process and encouraged the cohort to continue meeting and working together.

Along with the monthly calls, the cohort stayed connected and supportive by sharing training and other information, both during the monthly calls and in their Dropbox folder. This information included:

- Teaching portfolio information;

- Program assessment documents;

- Sharing tenure-related articles from the *Keeping Up Our Faculties* group (two cohort members were involved in this on-campus opportunity for female junior faculty members):

  - Getting Tenure
  - Implicit Bias
  - How to Say No
  - Work Life Balance
  - Self-promotion
  - Time Management

- Discussing personal CVs

- Sharing information from UME trainings attended by at least one cohort member:

  - Teaching Portfolio
  - Teaching Philosophy Statement
  - University of Maryland Extension Reporting System (UMERS) and Qualtrics
  - Research and Design
  - Diversity and Inclusion

Cohort Learned that Extension Constantly Changes and Schedules Fill up Quickly

At the end of 2017, the cohort reduced to five members. Two members left UME for positions out of state. As the year drew to a close, they struggled to find the time to meet. Nevertheless, the cohort remains committed and has regrouped to lay out plans for year two and focus on their three-year reviews.

The cohort members learned some valuable lessons that other tenure-track faculty members may find beneficial. Below are some of the highlights.

- Take your time and be strategic in your planning and programming;

- Say "no" when appropriate;

- Look for opportunities to collaborate for mutual benefit;

- Strive to balance work and life from the onset;

- Be efficient and get the most "bang for your buck" by developing programs and materials that will generate research, scholarship and/or teaching opportunities;

- Do not be afraid to reach out and ask questions; and

- Failures, when analyzed properly, can produce valuable information for future efforts.

Cohort Continue to Meet to Support Each Other

The cohort has continued connecting and strengthening collaborations as they proceed down the tenure track path. They have completed their three-year reviews and all have received contracts for the next three years.

> **UMD and UME have a variety of training/professional development opportunities available. Many are disseminated through email and directly to faculty members, but some can also be found at the following sites:**
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> ‣ **https://agnrgroups.umd.edu - This is a password-protected site. AGNR faculty and staff can create a user name and password to access. Training opportunities and other college information can be found on the AGNR Faculty and Staff Calendar.**
>
> ‣ **https://uhr.umd.edu**
>
> ‣ **https://uhr.umd.edu/learning-and-talent-development - This site offers supervisor, leadership and other training opportunities to all UMD employees. All sessions are held in person on campus.**
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> ‣ **https://advance.umd.edu**
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> ‣ **https://faculty.umd.edu/newfaculty/start.html**
>
> ‣ **https://uhr.umd.edu/learning-and-talent-development/new-employee-orientation**
>
> ‣ **University of Maryland Teaching Learning Transformation Center- https://tltc.umd.edu**

During the second year, the cohort worked together on items that would benefit each other's tenure process including:

‣ Writing and submitting a factsheet highlighting their initial cohort work for University of Maryland Extension publication;

‣ Creating a poster presentation based on experiences from year one and submitting proposals to present at national conferences. Poster presentations were accepted at the 2018 National Association of Extension 4-H Agents conference and the 2018 National Association of County Agricultural Agents conference;

‣ Sharing and reviewing each other's Annual Faculty Review and Appointment, Promotion and Tenure CV's;

‣ Sharing three-year review items with each other for review prior to submission dates;

‣ Sharing connections and opportunities such as information on how to submit a presentation proposal for Maryland 4-H Congress or the Maryland 4-H Volunteer and Teen Forum.

As the cohort looks forward to their final tenure package submission in 2021, plans to continue meeting and providing support are in place and additional topics of conversation or areas of work include:

‣ Scheduling conversations with recently tenured faculty members from the different Extension areas to discuss their process and experiences;

‣ Dedicating time to meet individually with a seasoned faculty member to solicit CV review and advice based on cohort members' three-year review results;

‣ Sharing questions and concerns resulting from the cohort's three-year review comparison with the appropriate people and administration; and

‣ Sharing experiences and lessons learned with 2022 and 2023 cohorts.

By continuing our connection and finding ways to work together, cohort members have not felt alone on their tenure track path. Despite the different program areas represented, each member serves as an unofficial mentor to the others and there is always someone to call or e-mail who is in the same metaphorical boat. This, if nothing else, has helped to keep members grounded and keep morale up while balancing the demands of tenure with the needs of the Extension programs they represent.

References

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